CHAPTER 11: GRAFFITI AS URBAN CHARACTER

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The Lonely Planet travel guide lists the graffiti covered laneways of Melbourne’s inner city as one of the city’s premier tourist attractions. Yet when images of these laneways were used by the state tourist authority for international place marketing, a political dispute erupted. The Minister for Tourism was forced to rebuke his own department, saying: “graffiti is not the way we want Melbourne to be promoted to a global audience” (Mitchell, 2008). Meanwhile, an image in one of these lanes by the famed British graffiti artist Banksy was covered with perspex (by the building owner) to protect it from overwriting. Graffiti has both positive and negative symbolic capital, it adds and diminishes streetscape value. These contradictions suggest that we look beyond the content of graffiti to the ways it is framed as an urban spatial practice. Why is graffiti where it is and what is its role in the construction and experience of place? How does graffiti add character to built form, and where? Through mapping and interviews in two case studies of inner-city Melbourne, this chapter examines how graffiti is mediated by the micro-morphology of the city and the ways it is seen to contribute to or damage urban character. The chapter explores the ways graffiti negotiates ambiguous territories combining public/private, visible/invisible, street/laneway, vandalism/art and art/advertising. It also analyses the intersecting and often conflicting desires to establish territory, to purify the neighbourhood, to create and protect urban character. In order to explore the relationships between graffiti and urban character, it is worth revisiting briefly the debates over graffiti’s status as vandalism-versus-art. Here, it is worth noting that vandalism and art are commonly defined as opposites (destruction versus creation), yet both can also be seen as different forms of transgression. While vandalism transgresses the law, art transgresses normal ways of seeing the world. With authorized public art often serving instrumental roles such as place branding, stimulating consumption or celebrating history, graffiti is often the most transgressive of public arts. The criminality of graffiti is based on a perception of violated property rights and of damage to neighbourhood image or place identity. Yet neither the ownership of blank urban walls nor questions of place identity are stable concepts. The question of vandalism-versus-art calls for an interrogation of conceptions and experiences of place.

The majority of sociological, ethnological, criminological and anthropological accounts of graffiti engage with the question of who writes graffiti, and why. Graffiti is widely linked to youthful rebellion (Sanders, 2005; Austin, 2001), the construction of subcultural identities (Macdonald, 2001; Iveson, 2007; Castleman, 1984), the territoriality of and communication between urban youth gangs and their members (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974). There are studies that focus on the site specificity of graffiti (Chmielewska 2007) yet the research focus remains on how graffiti benefits from, rather than contributes to, the place. Where territory is considered in the literature, graffiti is commonly compared to animals marking their territory through urination. Graffiti is linked to dirt and bodily waste, and in turn to the seminal work by Douglas (1966: 35), who famously defined dirt as “matter out of place”. The term ‘place’ in this famous phrase is a social ideal wherein anything foreign represents danger. For Douglas the ways we categorize material things and spaces is primarily based in social categories; in eliminating dirt we are “not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (Douglas, 1966: 2). Cresswell (1992) used this theme to argue that the spatial context of graffiti is vital in understanding how it will be received and defined. Graffiti not only transgresses the purity of a place but often also the authorised symbolic meanings and practices of power (Cresswell 1992: 342; Young 2005). Graffiti quite literally ‘takes place’ in the sense that it appropriates the street; it is ‘uncalled for’ (Stahl 2009: 74) yet demonstrates the claim of a ‘right’ to the blank surfaces of the city. Unlike the artwork of the gallery or salon, graffiti has a captive audience – a condition it shares with architecture and advertising, while it differs from them in its informality, illegality and transgression of codes. The following sections investigate the ways different types of graffiti infiltrate particular urban contexts.
Typology and Morphology

In order to examine the relationships between graffiti and urban character we undertook a detailed survey of graffiti in two inner-city Melbourne suburbs, Fitzroy and Brunswick. These sites were chosen as part of a much larger study of intensification and changes in urban character (Dovey et al, 2010). We choose to explore them here because they are examples where graffiti was seen by residents to be an integral part of the character, both positive and negative, in contrast to other parts of Melbourne where graffiti was largely regarded as unambiguously negative. Both Fitzroy and Brunswick have a rich mix of residential, retail, entertainment and light-industrial uses, well serviced by public transport. Both are fine-grained neighbourhoods with a diverse array of building stock, but they are undergoing a change in land-use and resident demographics through gentrification, with consequent strains on residents’ perceived sense of character. Residents commonly describe both Fitzroy and Brunswick as edgy, funky and diverse, terms that refer to both the social and physical character of the areas (Dovey et al, 2009; Woodcock et al, 2009) - graffiti is an integral part of the urban character.

The graffiti we have mapped in our study areas conforms loosely to a broadly consistent lexicon that has emerged globally to describe categories of graffiti (Dew, 2007; Halsey and Young, 2002; Kasino, 1997). The most commonly recognised types are ‘tags’, ‘throw-ups’, ‘stencils’, ‘paste-ups’, ‘slogans’ and ‘pieces’ (Figure 1.1). ‘Tags’ are a graphic signature written as a very fast and simple way to get a name onto a surface with a primary content of ‘I was here’. ‘Throw-ups’ are enlarged versions of a tag, generally take longer to complete but are performed rather than finished images. ‘Stencils’ and ‘paste-ups’ are sprayed and stuck on respectively. Like the
tags and throw-ups they can be reproduced very quickly but the designs are more complex (often poetic or obscure) and they seek a broader audience. The production of the artwork primarily happens in private and the application to the wall is relatively unskilled. ‘Slogans’ are textural rather than graphic and are highly legible - content is generally political or poetic and they address a broad public. In all of these types safety from prosecution is achieved through speed of application. The ‘piece’ is a larger scale, complex and time-consuming work often involving multiple colours and complex graphic design. The design of a piece is often the name of the writer but stylized until it is almost illegible to non-writers.

The distinctions between these categories are blurred - tags slide into throw-ups which slide into pieces; stencils, paste-ups and pieces can incorporate slogans. As we move through this typology from tags and throw-ups to pieces there is a major increase in both the time of application and design skill. Pieces, stencils and paste-ups are often semantically rich but with ambiguous meanings - in this they take on characteristics of the fine arts. The best examples of these categories are widely regarded as street-art rather than vandalism. In some cases they have been informally legalised through arrangements between writers and property owners; there is not the same pressure to complete a work in the shortest time possible. We also begin to see other forms of slippage as pieces can be legally commissioned as wall murals or student art-projects, paste-ups can slide into bill posters and art slides into advertising.
Figure 11.2 maps all publicly accessible space in key sections of Fitzroy and Brunswick. It shows how the materiality of urban morphology links to the distribution and expression of graffiti and mediates complex fields of visibility and opportunity. The colours mark the locations of different types of graffiti, while the sprayed viewsheds represent zones of visibility in public space. In both locations large amounts of visible blank wall are produced by both traditional and contemporary building types. These include streetwalls of non-residential
buildings (warehouses, workshops, offices) and the blank facades and garage doors of new infill housing, side walls of corner properties and laneway frontages. In both places, most of the older housing stock is row housing with stretches of garden frontage, which constrains the application of graffiti (shown as setbacks behind property boundaries). The street network of both places can be loosely divided into main streets (largely lined with retail), side and back streets (lined with a mix of residential, warehouse, industrial and some retail); and laneways. Patterns of pedestrian movement within this morphology are primarily along the main streets although the public gaze regularly penetrates into and through the laneways. While the lanes are often derelict and little used, in Fitzroy the spatial structure is regarded by residents as integral to the urban character and is protected by heritage legislation.

Figure 11.2 shows how graffiti is mediated by what Brighenti (2010: 329) calls “an economy of public attention.” Ferrell and Weide (2010: 51) argue that: “graffiti writers seek recognition... they need people to see their graffiti. Because of this, each act of writing graffiti involves a deliberate decision weighing visibility, location and risk.” The contradictory desire is for the performance to be hidden from the public gaze but for the results to be exposed. In both Fitzroy and Brunswick, tagging and throw-ups proliferate in back laneways where they are safe from surveillance yet lack publicity – plenty of surface but not enough gaze. The location of large pieces ranges from the deepest laneways to side streets where they can become visible from long distances. The public streetwalls in main streets have plenty of exposure but this exposure carries the danger of arrest. The more time one spends on a piece the less likely it is to be quickly erased but the more likely one is to be apprehended.

Figure 11.3: Row ends, laneways and billboards (photos: Kim Dovey and Simon Wollan)
One highly visible location for elaborate works of graffiti is the end of a row of terrace houses, where blank brick walls face the side street or laneway (Figure 11.3A). These row ends are generally visible in oblique view as they punctuate the streetwalls of row housing. In such locations the pieces quite often run right up to the corner but not onto the front of the house. Ferrell and Weide (2010: 54-5) suggest that “moral codes of the subculture” generally protect private house frontages and this was evident in this study where terrace house frontages were largely clear of graffiti (Figure 11.2). The row-end walls have an ambiguous quality in that they are both part of the house yet not fully identified with it. The Victorian style of most of these buildings reinforces the distinction between an expressive front and a blank side of exposed brick wall. Some of these pieces tend towards wall murals (or ‘legals’) since they are likely to have been commissioned by or negotiated with the residents and are signed by well-known graffiti artists. They often last for a number of years and are commissioned by residents to deter tagging.

Row-end walls to shops that occur adjacent to the main streets have a largely identical morphology to that of the residential rows but offer a substantially different role in the assemblage. The very high visibility of these walls lends them a capital value that both excludes and co-opts graffiti. Any tagging or throw-ups in these locations is likely to be erased because it damages the brand of the shop. Yet there are a number of locations where large pieces have been either authorized by the shop-owner or incorporated into the advertising regime for its products. In such cases there is generally a close connection between the youth subcultures who identify with the street art and the clientele of the outlet. Figure 11.3B shows a range of types on a corner shop from the tags and throw-ups of the laneway to a series of co-ordinated pieces (faces) along the street frontage. These pieces also frame (and informally advertise) the entrance to a gallery at the rear of a shop and then compete with the billboard at the point where they become visible from the main street.

On the main shopping streets the wall surfaces are largely saturated with advertising and display; graffiti is largely confined to tags and stencils located on the boundary columns between shopfronts. The main street in Brunswick which has less intensive retail development than Fitzroy also has significantly more graffiti (Figure 11.2). The slippage that occurs between legal/illegal and art/advertising on the end walls of shops sometimes extends to the shopfront and interior design of the shop. Again there may be a level of ambiguity involved as the art/advertising slippage lends a certain street-cred to the products within the store. Figure 11.3C shows a Brunswick restaurant with a long graffiti-themed mural as an integral part of sidewalk dining. Here the image is at once readerly and writerly: advertising the restaurant while incorporating graffiti signatures that are largely illegible.
The practices of graffiti writing go well beyond the logic of visibility and are mediated by the microscale material and morphological potentials of particular wall surfaces. The urban or micro-context can be used to add meaning to graffiti that then becomes inextricably grounded in place. A work may change meaning depending on one’s position in the street (Figure 11.4A) or meanings can change when a gate is opened or closed (Figure 11.4B). Graffiti is often layered like a palimpsest with new work responding to the work beneath it with transformed meanings and partial erasures. This links to the erasures that occur when residents attempt to keep the walls of their houses clean or when one graffiti writer erases older work with a new layer. Some residents have a practice of instant erasure and writers soon learn not to bother. Even the most elaborate of pieces do not last forever.
The tensions between graffiti as street art versus vandalism are represented in some ways by the distinctions outlined earlier between pieces, stencils and paste-ups on the one hand and tagging on the other. Figure 11.5 maps these distinctions at the larger scale across Brunswick. Tagging, identified with vandalism, floods the back lanes but is not restricted to them. Those categories identified with street art generally occupy a middle zone between the busiest streets where advertising dominates and the invisible laneways. While tagging is clearly more prolific the lack of a clear pattern in these maps demonstrates the inextricable interrelationship between tagging and other forms of graffiti, between street art and vandalism.

**URBAN CHARACTER**

We now turn to an account of resident attitudes to graffiti in these two case studies. This material is based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, as part of a series of larger studies into place and urban character (Dovey 2013; Dovey et al. 2010; Woodcock et al, 2009). These studies involved an attempt to understand the different ways that ‘character’ is experienced by residents in different parts of Melbourne. In all cases character is described in general terms as the ‘feel’ or ‘atmosphere’ of a particular place that is seen as both objectively based in urban form and subjectively experienced. Character is slippery because it is inseparably both social and physical. Resident attitudes to urban form are strongly aligned with social
attitudes to other residents; support for or opposition to proposed developments often intersects with issues of class and ethnicity (Dovey et al, 2010). Neighbourhood ‘character’ is not a fixed and stable condition, but an emergent property of everyday life that is produced in part by the struggles to defend it. The character of both case studies here was primarily portrayed as a valued diversity of both people (differences of social class and ethnicity) and buildings (differences of building type, scale and setback); dynamism and change were conceived as integral to place identity.

The discourse on graffiti emerged as one dimension of urban character. Our mapping and spatial analysis of it followed its emergence as a salient issue in the interviews. Fitzroy’s character is defined in terms of a rich social and spatial mixture - different people as well as different building types and styles. This is not seen as a stable or necessarily harmonious mixture but a somewhat seedy, edgy and transgressive character. Brunswick is also seen as characterized by a spatial and formal mix rather than consistency. Residents associate it with a certain level of messiness and craziness, without which Brunswick would lose its character. In both places attitudes to graffiti are decidedly ambiguous - reactions of residents can move from irritation to neutral and then to positive in a single response. The distinction between good and bad graffiti is linked to both where it is and to the artistic quality. A good number of resident responses reflect the idea that graffiti, like dirt, becomes vandalism when it is 'out of place’. The most trenchant opponents tend to link graffiti to vandalism, rubbish and obscenity, but often qualified with the sense that it has a place somewhere else, in less visible, unused or derelict spaces. Opposition to graffiti is sometimes linked to the idea that graffiti writers are not residents. In Fitzroy, this produces ambivalent attitudes to graffiti - some residents describe it as a “problem” that also “makes it Fitzroy”; this identity is seen as mostly produced by outsiders but is nonetheless appreciated for its aesthetic contribution.

While long-term residents may see graffiti as an intrusion, newer residents often see it as an inherent part of the character that attracted them there, investing the neighborhood with a certain creative energy. Graffiti is sometimes linked to the idea of a social mix which is widely seen as an integral part of the neighbourhood character. The best of the graffiti brings an image of creativity to these neighbourhoods, making them more attractive for gentrification which in turn threatens creative subcultures. Graffiti is also seen to produce a kind of productive discomfort - the ambivalence is a result of conflicting desires to keep graffiti at a distance yet to retain it as part of a rich urban mix. For some residents the acceptability of graffiti is more about social or legal agreement – it is acceptable if it is approved or commissioned by the owner of the property. In other words, a wall mural or advertisement would be more acceptable rather than graffiti. The categories of art and commerce thus provide social legitimation for what are otherwise perceived as transgressive personal acts of expression signifying social decay and a loss of authorized control.

Fitzroy and Brunswick embody a particular conception of urban character that is not shared throughout most of Melbourne’s suburbs where graffiti is simply seen as vandalism. In monofunctional middle-class suburbs where we also conducted interviews on urban character, graffiti was relatively rare and hidden in back lanes. When the issue did emerge in interviews it drew comments such as “not a lot of space for it” or “I’ve never seen anyone doing it”. Figure 11.6 maps all graffiti types to show the contrast between Brunswick and Fitzroy where graffiti is embodied as urban character and such middle-class suburbs where it is largely confined to invisible morphologies and is quickly erased elsewhere.
THE PLACE OF GRAFFITI

There are many theoretical lenses that might be deployed here and it may be useful to view this connection of graffiti to place identity and character through some of them. Inasmuch as local character and place identity is genuinely unique, it can be seen through an economic framework as a form of local monopoly (Harvey, 1996: 297–298). From this view the distinction between tagging and street art is that the former repels while the latter attracts capital through a market desire for authenticity. While tagging is linked to dereliction and abjection, street art can be a key dimension of gentrification. This distinction can be seen in Figure 11.2 - Fitzroy is more gentrified than Brunswick. Halsey and Pederick (2010) suggest that graffiti generates value by appropriating and transforming the undervalued sites of urban space. It has long been well known that artistic subcultures are the harbingers of gentrification (Smith 1996) and graffiti can be seen in this framework as a set of practices that appropriates the underused wall surfaces of inner-city landscapes before they are re-appropriated in turn by both housing and arts related industries. Thus there can be a close relationship.
between graffiti and the ways in which subcultural creative clusters emerge and migrate around the city (see chapter 10).

Both Fitzroy and Brunswick are identified as places where a dynamic social and formal mix is key; they contrast with places of purity and closure where all graffiti is seen to pollute the character. Massey (1993) has been a key proponent of a progressive, global and open sense of place that is open to difference, forward looking and globally connected. From such a view notions of place identified with stasis, nostalgia and enclosure are problematic because they privilege deeply rooted and essentialized identities that marginalize difference. The "progressive sense of place" is always in process; it valorises routes rather than roots (Massey 1993: 66-7). In this view a place can have a complex and unique character without essentialism; a sense of place that is neither inward nor backward-looking. We have argued elsewhere that this is the case for both Fitzroy and Brunswick where place identity is deep-seated without being deep-rooted (Dovey et al 2009; Woodcock et al, 2009). The question of the relation of graffiti to place identity also affirms the Lefebvrian insight that spatiality and sociality are inextricably intertwined – space is at once a product and a mode of production; space is socially constructed as sociality is spatially constructed (Lefebvre 1991). This reciprocity is apparent in the continual slippage (often in mid-quote) between social and spatial aspects of both graffiti and character. In Fitzroy both the people and the morphology are ‘edgy’ and ‘seedy’; in Brunswick they are ‘crazy’ and ‘chaotic’. In both cases the graffiti is inextricably intertwined with both urban morphologies and social identities. In such contexts there is a need for concepts and approaches that cut across sociality/spatiality and subject/object divisions.

Bourdieu’s conception of the habitus is one such socio-spatial concept that joins habit to habitat as it structures the taken-for-granted experiences and practices of everyday life (Dovey 2010: Ch 3). The habitus is described as “a sense of place, a sense of one’s place” and a “sense of the other’s place” (Bourdieu 1990: 113). It is also a “feel for the game” of social practice (Bourdieu 1993: 5), embodied rather than selfconsciously understood. The integration of graffiti and place involves the degree to which dispositions to write, consume, tolerate and erase graffiti have become embodied into the urban habitus. The appropriation of public wall surfaces by graffiti writers is an integral part of the practice of everyday life that requires a sophisticated ‘feel for the game’. The ‘rules’ of graffiti writing are embodied, unselfconscious and reproduced through performance; its habits and its habitats form a sense of place that is also part of an urban habitus. Bourdieu’s phrase ‘feel for the game’ also resonates with the way residents describe character as a ‘feel’ of the neighbourhood.

The work of Bourdieu on ‘fields’ of cultural production (Bourdieu 1984; 1993) is also of interest here. Art, architecture, urban planning, commerce, advertising and criminology are all relevant fields in this sense. The stakes available in any field are defined by Bourdieu as kinds of capital and of key interest here is symbolic capital - the social distinction that accrues with aesthetic ‘taste’. Fields of cultural production are seen in terms of an opposition between a popular mass culture and a more esoteric avant-garde - the sub-field wherein popularity and profit are disavowed; where the complex and difficult is privileged and the boundaries of art are transgressed. Graffiti has some characteristics in common with the avant-garde – it is not-for-profit, transgressive and can be difficult to understand; it disrupts the urban habitus (Austin 2010: 44). Within Bourdieu’s critique, the blank canvas becomes a painting only through the act of framing in a gallery where the capacity to see it as art becomes a mark of social distinction (Bourdieu 1984). In some ways graffiti involves the reverse - the blank streetwall becomes a canvas; rather than found objects or ready-mades being turned into art, urban walls are founded as ready-made galleries. While the gallery works by establishing a contemplative distance between the artwork and everyday life; graffiti erodes this distance and inherently resists incorporation into the field of art. There are no curators to authorize whose work gets on the wall and no way to stop good work being over-painted except peer group respect. Graffiti is inextricably enmeshed in the city with its intersecting fields of commerce, architecture, planning and law.
This grounding of graffiti in the myriad forms and practices of everyday life links also to assemblage thinking. While the rhizomic practice of graffiti writing is often seen through a Deleuzian framework (Brighenti 2010, Halsey and Young 2006), our goal is to understand the role of graffiti in constructions of place identity. A neighbourhood is a dynamic assemblage of connections, of which the desires to write or erase graffiti are part. The desires of graffiti writers to find new walls and to find an audience escalates until it reaches certain limits where it is checked by the desires of residents to erase it or those of capital to exploit it. While tagging often escalates in the back lanes, limited only by a lack of visibility or by saturation, on the more visible streets walls graffiti reaches a range of informally negotiated settlements with the interests and desires of residents and traders. Such negotiations include both the ‘where’ and the ‘what’ of graffiti - both the extensiveness (not on my front wall, maybe on the side) and the intensity of the imagery (no tagging). Such ‘settlements’ can be seen to link the settlement as place to the concept of the ‘plateau’ - a concept deployed by Bateson to define a level between levels where escalating conflicts are contained by social codes (Bateson 1973: 113). This complex social and formal mix of the urban assemblage is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 33) call an ‘intensive multiplicity’. The mixed ‘sense’, ‘feel’, or ‘character’ of the neighbourhood is akin to the flavour of a soup where the addition of spices that may be painful by themselves can add to the experience of the mix. Graffiti, like spice, only makes sense in the context of the urban mix.

This discussion of the place of graffiti and its acceptability to residents has been framed and mapped here through a series of twofold constructs: public/private space, visible/invisible walls, legal/illegal practices, vandalism/art and art/advertising. In each case graffiti is shown to operate in the spaces between these poles where the one folds into the other. Graffiti is variously regarded as both street-art and vandalism, it seeks both the privacy of crime and the publicity of exhibition. Graffiti takes on both positive and negative symbolic capital; it both sells and pollutes these places, streets and buildings.

In the case studies we have outlined here graffiti is ingrained and integrated with conceptions of place and character. It is also dependent on the particular materiality and morphology of the neighbourhoods. While it is applied to and erased from urban surfaces, it is more than a veneer applied to the urban fabric because of the deeper social identifications it both facilitates and expresses. The graffiti, like the sense of place, is deeply ingrained without being deeply rooted as essence; it is immanent rather than transcendent. In both Fitzroy and Brunswick place identity is constructed by differences of people, practices and built forms. The different viewpoints on graffiti are integral to this mix. The graffiti is not only produced in opposition or competition to gentrification and commercialisation but is also produced and transformed by them.

The graffiti is also thoroughly ingrained with the urban morphology of these places – the degree to which the street grids, building types and architecture produce public or semi-public blank surfaces is crucial to the capacity for graffiti. Blank public walls are largely a side effect of density – detached suburban houses with setbacks and perforated fences effectively prevent graffiti. Brunswick and Fitzroy embody not only a mix of people, functions and forms, but also a mix of public and private interfaces. The graffiti covered walls become connections not just between writers, but between different parts of these communities and between these communities and a broader world.

Graffiti is often an integral part of creative clusters (chapter 10) or production ensembles that have come to form key nodes of an information economy - an important source of new symbolic capital for creative industries as both graphic styles and graffiti artists spin off into advertising, graphic design and art galleries. Fitzroy has long housed a significant cluster of creative industries and Brunswick is an emergent cluster. Such clusters are now well known to work in concert with neo-liberal agendas of gentrification and place branding (Hutton 2009). In 2011 a major public wall in Fitzroy was covered with a giant mural (Figure 11.7) that integrates the place branding of Fitzroy (“Welcome to Fitzroy”), an advertisement for the adjacent entertainment venue and promotion of the graffiti crew (Everfresh), who sell graffiti-themed tee-shirts and books.
By overstepping the codes of property and behaviour graffiti calls these codes into question and constructs a sense of place where sociality is in question. Graffiti becomes integral to urban character in places where it helps to construct this legitimation of transgression, yet it cannot do this without also and at the same time becoming a form of symbolic capital and place branding. Graffiti that emerges and is practiced in opposition to advertising is tolerated under condition that it partially becomes its nemesis; as Halsey and Pederick (2010: 97) put it: “graffiti is permitted to exist when it ceases to be itself”. McGaw (2008) links this appropriation of graffiti through commodification to the situationist concept of recuperation. This dance with the devil between graffiti and advertising is echoed in the relations of graffiti to the legitimate art of the gallery. Artists often become torn between fields, earning an income from one to subsidize the other. Practices of graffiti writing operate between categories and it is tempting to construct a policy for this middle ground. Young (2010) has suggested a policy of “negotiated consent” whereby graffiti can remain with the consent of property owners, coupled with “zones of tolerance”. Yet such progressive policy begs further questions: who determines that blank streetwalls are not public property and who inscribes the boundaries of tolerance? Halsey and Pederick (2010: 97) call for a response that “makes room for graffiti as neither publicly sanctioned art nor crime”. Whatever the policy outcomes it is crucial to acknowledge the role of erasure in ensuring both the transience of most graffiti and the ongoing provision of available wall surfaces.

The adaptive game of move and countermove is also played out between writers/artists and residents. Some residents allow their houses to be written on to deter gentrification; others commission large pieces to deter tagging. Each is an attempt to stabilize the assemblage and neither is successful. Near the main streets writers compete with advertising bills and billboards; some shops commission pieces to accrue cultural cachet within their niche market. It is often the struggle between different desires to territorialize that produces intensity – taggers tag and residents erase; one writer overwrites another. Erasures play a key role here - they stimulate both new work and a higher quality of work that will not be quickly erased. Inevitably all work is erased in time. Graffiti finds a place in those parts of our cities where identities and practices are open and unfinished. It is caught in the paradox of authority and authenticity: if graffiti is authentic then it cannot be authorized and once authorized it cannot be authentic.

What graffiti adds to urban space is that it throws its publicness into contention. To understand this requires that we go beyond the question of ‘is it art or vandalism?’ As Brighenti (2010: 328) puts it: “... the two conventional, opposing views that interpret writing alternatively as art or as deviance fail to identify the real stake in the practice of writing... the definition of the nature and the limits of public space” and affirmed by Halsey and Pederick (2010: 96): “One of the key effects of graffiti is to awaken the city to spaces it has forgotten about and in so doing to redefine the limits and purpose of city-space”.

Figure 11.7: Place marketing (photo: Kim Dovey)
The stencilled image by Banksy that was ‘protected’ with perspex was soon destroyed when grey paint was poured behind the perspex; another small one by the same artist remained camouflaged in the Fitzroy mix until inadvertently overpainted in 2013. Meanwhile Melbourne’s graffiti attracts tourists and other Australian cities discuss how they can emulate this success. Yet nothing will kill graffiti more effectively than promotion and preservation. Graffiti cannot be fully defined or preserved without becoming purified and killed; a quality it shares with urban character and place identity.

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