PERFORMING URBAN RIVALRY:
THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF FIRST AND SECOND CITIES
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How does a city speak? Is it living? Does it breathe? Does a city have a pulse? Where does it get goosebumps? Or the hairs that stand on the back of its neck? Where are they? If a city had a voice, I wonder, where would you go to hear it?

-Voiceover of 2003 MCG television commercial

Recent advertising campaigns promoting the respective attractions of Melbourne and Sydney are marked by an unexpected reversal. In the past Melbourne has focused its promotional energies on its café culture and European ambience; Sydney on the other hand has basked in its harbourside splendour and globally recognisable architectural icons. But in a surprising departure from those previous campaigns, a recent television commercial for Melbourne’s largest claim to an iconic acronym, the MCG, aligned the spirit of the city itself with its distinctive sporting stadium (see above). In a mirror image of this strategy reversal, Tourism NSW earlier this year launched a major new media campaign promoting Sydney. To be screened mostly in Australia and NZ, the $4 million television and magazine campaign was positioned as part of an effort to revitalize a struggling local tourism industry. The distinctiveness of this new campaign (as identified by its producers) was a highly conscious attempt to background the usual iconic suspects such as the Harbour Bridge and Opera House and highlight instead the richness of the city’s interior life; its cultural institutions, shopping, dining and entertainment venues etc. Tourism NSW chair Morris Newman explained that the campaign was attempting to express Sydney’s image as a ‘world city’ (as confirmed by pre-campaign market research). As he put it, ‘Sydney is the financial centre of Australia and an international city of true world standing … it’s Australia’s only true world city’ (Ninemsn [AAP], 2004).

Newman’s statement is curious and revealing in its assertion of Sydney’s aspiration to a form of economic and cultural prominence—or ‘world status’. It relies on an implicit comparison to an implied ‘lesser’, national rival (or rivals); that is, pretenders to the throne of (Australian) ‘world city’. Sydney in this utterance is not just a world city because of the relative density of its economic assets, its ‘creative’ class, and cultural facilities, which authorise comparisons to other members of this global club (London, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and so on); it is a world city because of its victory over—and difference from—other national and regional rivals for the
However, in the past 20 years no one could seriously argue against Sydney’s domination in terms of global recognition of Australian cities. It has clearly been number one. Newman could of course be just rubbing salt into the aspirational wounds of Melburnians. More interestingly, Newman’s statement offers a starting point for considering cities and the discursive reiteration of their identities from an underdeveloped academic perspective. His statement functions as a reminder that even after the singing competition seems over in the Opera house, urban identity still remains imagined within the historically sedimented relations of rivalry.

We are particularly concerned in this paper with the ways in which cities are imagined and discursively produced as places of comparison, of mutual exchange, of aspiration and envy—such that the picture that emerges of the city is by definition a partial one; incomplete and passionately ‘one-eyed’. What are the contours and tactics that inform the ongoing identity performances, those based around being—or, indeed, wanting to be—Australia’s number one, or number two, number three etc city? What is at stake in a cultural politics of cities that fuels such rivalrous and affectively charged comparisons?

In order to begin to address this question, this paper is organized into two sections. In the first part we turn to the literature on urban identity and consider productive points of entry for our interests. The second section uses the example of the historical rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne to pose a number of hypotheses (that we wish to test later through other examples) about the relational process of urban identity formation.

I. CITIES AND IDENTITY: ORIENTATIONS

A key imperative of our study is to move away from the tendency to conceive cities as total or complete social universes. The most obvious and engaging manifestation of this in the genre of what might be called the ‘city biography’ which spans literary, historical, journalistic and academic studies. Works such as John Birmingham’s *Leviathan: The Unauthorised Biography of Sydney* (1999), Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography* (2001), Mike Davis’ *City of Quartz* (1990) and even perhaps Ackbar Abbas’ *Hong Kong: Culture of Disappearance* (1997) reinforce this solipsistic tendency in which the city is posited as a foundational entity. From our perspective, these works are insightful in their evocation of what might be described as the ‘psychologies’ of particular places. Often also inspiring in their interdisciplinary scope (or, at least, in their attempt to combine historical, cultural, economic and political perspectives) these studies offer insights into the complex and distinct urban ‘logic’ of the city under examination.
In contrast, recent literature on globalization and the city inverts these biographical concerns with the logic of the city and is oriented instead toward the logic of globalization that produces a structure within which cities become actors and performers skilled in aspects of the agglomeration, manipulation and flows of mobile capital. Leading writers such as Saskia Sassen (1994; 2001; 2002) have persuasively demonstrated the economic domination of urban formations such as London, Tokyo, New York and Paris, and their role in the production of a new, uneven geography of globalization via the concentration of financial power, corporate headquarters, and service and control centers. While such work has been central in empirically analysing the weight these cities bear globally, it does tend to mean that more research has been conducted on these relatively few influential urban sites. These cities continue to be the dominant ‘lens’ through which contemporary capitalism is understood.

Perhaps the most productive area of scholarship trying to address this limitation — itself a precursor and outgrowth of the globalization studies1 — is that of the developing ‘world cities’ research, which at one level is driven by an interest in world cities ‘below the highest level’ (Beaverstock et al 1999: 445) of London, New York etc.2 This research is marked by an explicit interest and debate among its contributors (see, for example, Short et al, 2000) concerning the epistemology of urban comparison. World cities’ scholars have explored combinations of indicators which might form indexes against which any individual city might be assessed in terms of its global performance capacity. For example, Friedman (1986) suggests seven such indicators: numbers of major financial centers; headquarters for TNCs; international institutions; growth of service sectors; important manufacturing centers; major transportation nodes; and population size. Other researchers continue to refine and add measures of telecommunications infrastructure; quality of life; presence of cultural industries and so on (see, for example, Short et al 2000: 318). This has helped to produce a complex typology of world cities which usefully moves away from relatively fruitless exercises in ranking cities, to more generative questions of similarity and difference. Nevertheless, however empirically sophisticated this typology, it remains primarily a taxonomy organized through economic difference. As Amin and Thrift observe, this approach reproduces a notion of ‘cities as islands of economic competitiveness’ (cited in Doel and Hubbard 2002: 361). Within such an epistemology, the identity of a city such as Melbourne becomes produced via its relationship to the index not in relation to other cities. Ultimately, such exercises are also, we would argue, more concerned with the similarities rather than differences between cities. What is needed to extend and complement such studies is a perspective that counters the problem of such research, which as Short et al (2000: 324) puts it, only makes ‘the most tenuous connections between global processes and local lives’.
Accordingly, we look first to everyday discourse for clues to the foundations of a different kind of analytical framework that might more convincingly map the connections between the lived experience of city identities and the complex global systems in which those identities are produced. To do justice to the analysis of cities we believe that it is necessary to utilize and examine a range of interwoven discourses (economic, political, identity, aesthetic, ethnographic, policy and sociological). At the heart of such a multivalent approach is a recognition of the slippery nature of the urban as an ‘object’ of study and the problematic reductionism that can occur when an urban form like ‘the city’ is singled out for attention. We refuse, as Meaghan Morris (borrowing from Robert Somol) once put it, ‘to be “sucked in” . . . by “singularity”’ (M. Morris 1990: 15). In this sense we do not intend to universalise the first-second city model that follows in either a theoretical or empirical sense.

II. SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE AS FIRST AND SECOND CITIES

It was the sound of the word ‘Melbourne’ that attracted me. ‘Sydney’ sounded hard.

-Chong Lim (cited in Coote 2003:219)

In proposing our initial case study — the longstanding rivalry between the Australian cities of Melbourne and Sydney — we want to emphasize in the strongest possible terms that our purpose is not one of adjudication in some sort of urban ‘beauty contest’. We take Olympic committee chair of the time, Juan Samaranch’s declaration in 1993 ‘[a]nd the winner is See-d-ney’ to be unproblematic in most senses (e.g. Sydney’s economic prominence etc). Instead, our interest is threefold: the processes and mechanisms of comparison in urban identity formation; how and why the comparative remains important to urban institutions and inhabitants even when a clear hierarchy of cities within a national, regional or global context has been consolidated; and finally, how and why attachments to place are only able to be performed or articulated through reference to other similar yet different places.

We are particularly interested in the persistence of discourses of urban comparison at an everyday level and the ways in which these are a curious mixture of rational and emotional expressions. We want to take seriously what is for the most part an anecdotally articulated relationship between the two cities; to give serious consideration to something that is otherwise only admitted in back-handed compliments (‘don’t get me wrong, I really like Sydney but...’) or outright dismissives (‘well, they would say that; they are from Melbourne after all’).
In order to lay the foundation for our work on these two cities we propose five hypotheses (that could be further expanded to other exemplary instances of urban rivalry). These hypotheses may at first glance appear to be contradictory or mutually exclusive and we are not suggesting at this stage of our research that all or any of them are sustainable. Instead, they offer a starting point for untangling the apparent intangibilities at the heart of city comparisons.

**Five hypotheses about urban comparison**

I. **Comparison charges the city: comparison imbues cities from the outset - it is not their effect**

   As far as I am concerned, I will treat Hong Kong as a part of Melbourne that I am visiting for the first time and nothing more.

   -Chris Gregory (1997: 231)

The logic of this hypothesis is that there is no ‘Sydney’, there is no ‘Melbourne’; there is only ‘Melbourne and Sydney’. As such, cities ‘originate’ in chorus — they are never autochthonous but emerge already in relationship to other cities.

We would expect to see comparison present as cities develop through their histories and geographies. For example the Sydney Olympics of 2000 was cause for much comparative anguish in Melbourne — not just in terms of Sydney’s international prominence during the event but with Melbourne’s recognition of its own former but since faded glory as an Olympic city in 1956.

II. **The relationship between first and second cities is never binary but is continuous.**

   In 1951 the choice for me was Casablanca, Saigon or Melbourne.

   -Mirka Mora (cited in Coote 2003: 43)

Here the emphasis is on how urban comparison might be serial rather than simply binary in nature. There is no ‘Melbourne and Sydney’; there is only London (and) New York (and) Sydney (and) Melbourne (and) Brisbane (and) Adelaide and so on.

As Gertrude Stein, in a moment of arithmetic reflection pondered: ‘After all the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one … One and one and one and one. That is the natural way to go on counting’ (1975: 227).
That being said, first and second cities appear to have an investment in the solace that comes from the binary limit — the fear of being overcome by an ‘other’ is preferable to the idea that first-ness or second-ness (especially as an aspiration for first-ness) might be annihilated by the pure difference of the limitless sequence.

In this sense first and second cities bear a relationship to the millennial - to the experience of ‘endings’ but not as they might like to imagine them (as a matter of finality or closure). Rather first and second cities are caught up in the constant deferral of their eclipse that arises in part from recognising that all cities in reality are ‘one’ articulated in the comparative language of ‘not first’. What Melbourne fears most is not that is will never become Sydney but that it might become Adelaide or Hobart.

III. Comparison gives no credit to conventional claims for originality.

Envy is a silent secretive process and not always verifiable.

-Helmut Schoeck (1969)

Taking the premise of pure difference a step further, this hypothesis argues that the claims for precedence made by first cities on the basis of chronology or prior presence (for example who came first) are a secondary consideration. Comparison, at least where cities are concerned, is seldom about rational indices or logics. Furthermore second cities also claim certain, equally unlikely ‘privileges’ — they are often self-proclaimed as being more ‘cultural’ (who can forget the musicals-led recovery of Melbourne’s Jeff Kennett?).

This hypothesis instead proposes that comparison itself outgrows the terms of the relationship in question; for example ‘second-ness’ might be a state unrelated to a specific comparison - an expression or articulation of the derivative per se rather than a specific imitation of a ‘first city’. And so it is widely perceived in Melbourne that the following buildings bear similarity as a feature.\(^3\) Comparisons between:

- Princess Bridge, Melbourne/Blackfriar’s Bridge, London
- Parliament House, Melbourne/Leeds Town Hall
- Shrine Of Remembrance/Mausoleum at Halicarnassus
- Russell St. Police Station/Empire State Building, New York
- ICI Building/Lever Building, Chicago
- Melbourne Exhibition Building/Florence Cathedral
- Telstra House Melbourne/Gropius Tribune Tower (design)

Fig. 1 Manchester Unity Building, Melbourne/Herald Tribune Building, Chicago
(Image source: B. Morris)

... suggest that the former are derivative and therefore somehow represent our ‘second city-ness’.

IV. City comparison is not a matter for monogamists: compared cities are multiple and coterminous in their comparisons

Melbourne also has relationships with Boston and Thessaloniki but none with capitals. Why not New York, Paris, Tokyo or Rome? Keen to continue the romance metaphor Cr So says every man looking for a lover knows that there are some women out of their reach. “Its like romance. You know your limit. You know there are some people you fancy who will knock you back”.

(Age, 6 Mar. 2004: 9).
This hypothesis operates from the principle that there are no exclusive relationships where
cities are concerned — all cities are simultaneously made up of first and second and third (and
so on) relationships each of which differ in character and weight according to history and
geography. So Sydney might be a first city to Melbourne but at the same time a second city to
LA for example (or even more interestingly a second city to Melbourne with regard to specific
comparisons or at different points in time).

V. The act of comparison made by a second city is different to that made by a first city or a
third city.

“There’s nowhere like Melbourne,” a friend said to me as, coming down a city
laneway, we found another bar that looked like the contents of an op-shop had
been upended into a former loading zone. Too right, I thought, ... no other city
is so deluded about its own uniqueness.


Comparison is not a leveling activity even though it is shared between cities - the roles
occupied by cities in their comparisons are never the same; the performance of ‘first-ness’ or
‘second-ness’ differs for each city. In this hypothesis the emphasis is on not trying to reduce all
inter-city rivalry to one mode and to note the real differences in how second cities for example
experience their ‘second-ness’ (for Chicago it might be a matter of pride -- for Melbourne it is
a source of consternation and resentment).

Conclusion

In focusing on the relational features of urban identity (in this instance first-second city
rivalry), this paper attempts to establish a new approach to the analysis of cities; a critical
analysis which takes more seriously the everyday urban mythologies perpetuated at the most
idiomatic level of cultural politics.

In particular we are not attempting to create a typology of cities (as per the world city
literature). Instead we are interested in the varied and complicated experience of first-ness
and second-ness and the role of comparison in fuelling these as an integral part of the
formation of city identities.
REFERENCES


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1 The terms itself is attributed to architect Patrick Geddes (1915) who coined it to describe those cities where most of the world's most important business was done.

2 A useful starting point for this literature is the GaWC (Globalisation and World Cities Research Network and Group) website at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/.

3 We are indebted to the observations of Chris Gregory (1997: 265) in identifying these examples.