

## **A tale of two precincts: a phenomenological analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

An examination of the extant literature relating to urban tourism in general highlights the predominantly structural and functional nature of existing research. Issues such as spatial form, land-use mix, development processes, management, marketing, economic impact and accommodation are recurring themes. While such studies have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of many utilitarian themes surrounding tourism precinct development and management, there is a dearth of material as to how such places are experienced by tourists.

This study sought to redress the above and applied a phenomenological framework to investigate the nature of the tourist experience in two Sydney, Australia, precincts: *The Rocks* historic precinct adjacent to the Sydney Opera House; and *Darling Harbour*, a festival marketplace development built on a reclaimed dockland site. The precincts are approximately two kilometres apart.

The outcomes from the first precinct examined, The Rocks, have been reported elsewhere (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005). In that study, 21 in-depth interview sessions, comprising a total of 31 participants, were undertaken with visitors to The Rocks over a three-day period in March 2001. The second study, at Darling Harbour, sought to understand the experience of tourists within the festival market place setting. A total of 36 in-depth interviews with 59 participants were conducted over a similar period in October 2002. This paper compared and contrasted the experience of visitors to both precincts with a view to determining the essential characteristic or phenomenological essence of the experience.

In both precincts the phenomenon of *place* was identified as the essence of experience. The analysis and interpretation highlights how the physical and social attributes of a precinct shape the experience of visitors. Importantly it is argued that

while a precinct may be outwardly dissimilar such differences don't of themselves produce different phenomenological outcomes for visitors.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, precincts, urban tourism

## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to build on work conducted by the authors over the past three years into urban tourism in general and tourist precincts in particular (Griffin, Hayllar & King, 2006; Hayllar & Griffin, 2005; Griffin & Hayllar, 2004). As noted previously, tourism has long been a feature of many major cities, but the nature of the urban tourist experience is still, in relative terms, poorly understood. In most urban destinations, tourist visitation tends to be concentrated rather than dispersed, and specific locales within cities, *tourism precincts*, become the foci of visitor activity.

For the purposes of this research we have defined a tourism precinct as "a distinctive geographic area within a larger urban area, characterised by a concentration of tourist-related land uses, activities and visitation, with fairly definable boundaries. Such precincts generally possess a distinctive character by virtue of their mixture of activities and land uses, such as restaurants, attractions and nightlife, their physical or architectural fabric, especially the dominance of historic buildings, or their connection to a particular cultural or ethnic group within the city. Such characteristics also exist in combination" (Hayllar & Griffin, 2005: 517).

The research on urban tourism precincts to date has been limited and narrow in scope, with a particular preponderance of studies which have examined precincts from a geographic or planning perspective (Stansfield and Rickert, 1970; Wall and Sinnott, 1980; Ashworth and de Haan, 1985; Law, 1985; Jansen-Verbeke, 1986; Meyer-Arendt, 1990; Burtenshaw *et al.*, 1991; Getz, 1993a, 1993b; Getz *et al.*, 1994; Fagence, 1995; Pearce, 1998). Recently the scope of precinct studies has expanded to embrace a sociological perspective (Mullins, 1991; Conforti, 1996; Chang *et al.*, 1996). McDonnell and Darcy (1998) raised the notion of tourism precincts functioning as part of the overall marketing strategy of destinations, although not specifically in an urban context, while Judd (1995) developed ideas around the economic development role of precincts.

Other studies have focussed on particular types of urban tourism precincts. In the context of this study the work of Rowe and Stevenson (1994) is apposite. Rowe and Stevenson (1994: 181) trace the development of the "festival market place" concept from the redevelopment of the Boston waterfront which "provided an urban tourism model for other depressed cities and urban sites to emulate, first in the United States and then around the world. Baltimore's Harborplace, New York's South Street, San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf and London's Docklands can all be seen as fashioned on the festival market place." In a series of similarly relevant studies of historic precincts, Ashworth and Tunbridge's (1994, 2000) work "attempts to define and explain the composite concept of the tourist-historic city and to outline the processes which have created and maintained it...and the planning and management of such cities" (p5).

However, the various studies of specific precinct types does not alter our observation that taken together, research on urban tourism precincts has been *predominantly*

*descriptive* and focused on: their role in the tourism attractions mix; their physical and functional forms; their economic significance; their role as a catalyst for urban renewal; accounts of their evolution and associated development processes; and, perhaps more broadly, their role, locality and function within the context of urban planning.

In contrast, recent studies by the authors of this paper have represented a departure from this foundational work and have attempted to understand the 'precinct experience' from the tourist's perspective using an approach grounded in phenomenology. This paper builds on that work using *The Rocks* historic area and the *Darling Harbour* festival market place, two highly significant tourism precincts in Sydney, Australia, as case studies. As we have argued elsewhere, "understanding how the tourist experiences a precinct, and in particular the attributes, both tangible and intangible, which engender a certain quality to that experience, can produce implications for the effective and appropriate planning, development, management and marketing of the precinct" (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005).

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## **THE STUDY SITES**

### ***The Rocks***

'The Rocks' is located on the western side of Sydney Cove, directly opposite the Sydney Opera House and adjacent to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is one of Sydney's most successful tourism precincts, receiving over 9 million visits in 2002, of which 65% were made by international tourists. Half of all international tourists to Sydney visit The Rocks at some time during their stay, making it the city's third most visited place behind Darling Harbour and the Opera House (SHFA fact sheet Mar-Dec2002).

The Rocks takes its name from the rocky outcrops that once dominated the western side of Sydney Cove. It is generally acknowledged as the site of the first European settlement and as such is promoted to tourists as the 'Birthplace of Australia'. In the early days of the colony the area developed rapidly to house the workers serving in the neighbouring port. Today, The Rocks contains Australia's oldest extant private dwelling (Cadman's Cottage) and some of its earliest commercial buildings and warehouses. Tourism activities and land uses predominate, with few residents remaining, although the adjacent and largely uncommercialised area of Millers Point to the immediate west retains both its historic built fabric and a large resident population.

The Rocks owes its survival to a revised state government program for urban planning and heritage protection that commenced in 1976. The program emphasised conserving the built heritage wherever feasible, and finding economic uses for the restored buildings. Tourism was seen as the main way in which this could be achieved.

Over the next decade or so, much of the historic built fabric was conserved and occupied by tourist-related uses – duty free and craft shops, restaurants and hotels. Some redevelopment occurred where the original buildings were beyond repair or not considered worthy of conservation. Development controls were introduced in an attempt

to ensure that both new development and building restorations fitted within desired streetscape plans and maintained the character of the precinct. Opinions vary widely on the quality and authenticity of these efforts (Bennett, 1988; Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000; Waitt, 2000).

In 1999 a new statutory authority, the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (SHFA) was established whose responsibilities also embraced other key harbourside tourism precincts, including Darling Harbour and the Opera House. The Rocks must still largely fund itself, primarily through rental income from commercial tenants. As these rents are based substantially on retail turnover, SHFA seeks to encourage visitation to The Rocks as a means of maximising spending in the shops, pubs and restaurants, and hence the rents they receive.

### ***Darling Harbour***

Darling Harbour is Sydney's most successful tourism precinct hosting over 13 million visitors in 2002 ([www.darlingharbour.com.au](http://www.darlingharbour.com.au)). Of these, 59 percent were international tourists and 31 percent local 'Sydneyiders'. The latter highlights the important role played by Darling Harbour as part of the urban entertainment mix for residents.

Located south west of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Darling Harbour is easily accessed by boat from Circular Quay (5 minutes) or on foot from the CBD (5-10 minutes). Approximately 1.5 kilometres by road from The Rocks, the eccentricities of urban design make it a rather tortuous expedition by either motor vehicle or on foot.

Originally known as Long Cove due to its elongated form and later Cockle Bay reflecting the plentiful supply of shellfish within its environs, Governor Ralph Darling ended the ambiguity in 1826 by giving his name to what had become Australia's busiest seaport. In the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the harbour was dredged, portions of it 'reclaimed', and substantially redeveloped to accommodate larger ships. A railway goods yard was constructed to assist the movement of goods into and out of the port. The 'Corn Exchange' was also built and became a landmark for those entering the city from the west across the Pyrmont Bridge which dissected the harbour at that point. In 1902 a new steel swing this bridge was built (now one of the oldest remaining of its type in the world) to provide ease of access for large ships into all parts of the harbour.

Darling Harbour continued its industrial role into the early 1970s when changes in shipping technology, toward containerisation, and a decline in rail transport in favour of road, left massive warehouses and rail infrastructure substantially underutilised and in decline. In a metaphorical portent of its industrial future, the last freight train left Darling Harbour to the strains of a funeral march played by the NSW Transport Workers Union Band in 1984! Soon after, the NSW Government announced its decision to redevelop Darling Harbour and 'return it to the people' after 150 years of industrial use.

To realise the above, the government established the special purpose Darling Harbour Authority (DHA) in late 1984 to fast-track development of the site in time for the 1988 bicentennial of European settlement in Australia. Formally opened by Queen Elizabeth in May 1988, Darling Harbour has continued to grow and develop. It now contains a range of museums, including the National Maritime Museum, and commercial attractions such as the Sydney Aquarium. In addition, it features extensive tourist shopping areas,

restaurants and cafés, public open space, children's playgrounds, hotels, open air performance areas, the Sydney Convention Centre and is adjacent to the Sydney Casino.

### ***Precincts together***

Taken together, Darling Harbour and The Rocks represent two of the three most visited tourism sites in Sydney. Each of them is the product of government driven redevelopment processes. One has attempted to capture and represent old Sydney town, while the other, the new and bustling character of a post modern city in the new world.

While their history and management are intertwined, theoretically they present contrasting experiences for the tourist. An historic tourist precinct such as The Rocks perhaps implies an experience of relaxed contemplation and an enlivened curiosity toward the social and cultural tapestry of the area. Alternatively, the festival market place typified by Darling Harbour, is presented as a place for action and movement, a place of attractions and interaction with others.

The paper compares and contrasts the activities of tourists in both precincts with a view to examining how the social, cultural and design aspects of a precinct conspire to shape the collective experience of its visitors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***The approach***

An outline of the phenomenological approach used in the two studies which are the subject of this paper is detailed in Hayllar and Griffin (2005). However, in order to maintain the internal integrity of the current work, a brief review is provided.

To describe phenomenology and its constituent methodology is complex given that there are 'phenomenologies' to which are ascribed a variety of research and interpretive approaches. Patton (2002:104) argues the term phenomenology has become so "popular and has been so widely embraced that its meaning has become confused and diluted". While a review of phenomenological philosophy and theory is beyond the scope of this paper, the approach adopted accords with the central tenets of phenomenology which is to explore lived experience and how individuals transform this lived experience into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning. "This requires methodologically, carefully and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002: 104).

Van Manen (1990:36) argues that the "aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience". More eloquently he notes that "there is a determinate reality-appreciation in

the flow of living and experiencing life's breath. Thus a lived experience has a certain essence, a "quality" that we recognise in retrospect" (Van Manen, 1990:36).

The method adopted in this study is primarily hermeneutic phenomenology. It attempts to be descriptive, to show how things look, to let things 'speak for themselves' and, in the context of the hermeneutic project, it is interpretive. While there may be, at first glance, an implicit contradiction between description and interpretation, this may be resolved "if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) 'facts' of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process" (Van Manen, 1990:180).

Van Manen (1990) suggests four methodological practices for hermeneutic phenomenological writing. In brief, these practices are:

#### **Turning toward lived experience**

To 'do' phenomenological research requires orienting one's thinking toward the questions: what is something really like, what is the nature of the lived experience, what is it about this phenomenon that sets it apart from similar or like phenomena? In turning toward lived experience the researcher needs to 'bracket' his or her prior experience. Bracketing requires the laying aside or 'suspension' of our understandings, assumptions and previous knowledge of the experience under investigation in order to approach it with fresh insight (Husserl, 1973).

#### **Investigating the experience as lived**

This practice points to the use of methods appropriate to yielding data suitable for phenomenological analysis. The major source of data for these projects was a series of in-depth interviews.

#### **Reflecting on essential themes**

Moving from data collection to data interpretation involves a process of phenomenological reflection (Van Manen, 1990). The grasping, elucidating or explicating of the essential characteristics of an experience is the basis of the phenomenological endeavour. Reflection and interpretation are the means to that end.

Reflecting on themes and 'working' the text is a dialectical process between the text, the researcher and the writing endeavour.

#### **Writing and rewriting**

To a large extent, the ideas of phenomenological reflection expressed above, and the writing task itself, are false dichotomies; writing and reflection are symbiotic tasks. Van Manen (1990) argues that the approach to writing should focus on maintaining an underlying sensitivity to the language, and through that, to the phenomenon being explored.

In addition to these processes of epistemological practice, Van Manen (1990) also identifies what may be considered as principles that course through each of the above practices. These are:

#### **Maintaining a strong and oriented relation**

This principle is a warning to those writing phenomenology to ensure that their writing and interpretations remain oriented to the phenomenological questions under investigation.

#### **Considering parts and whole**

The final principle is concerned with ensuring that the interpretation is consistent with the various parts of the analysis. "At several points it is necessary to step back and look at the total, at the contextual givens and how each of the parts needs to contribute toward the total" (Van Manen, 1990:33-34)

Taken together, each of the practices and principles provide a workable methodological framework for a phenomenological study.

#### ***The research questions***

Data collection and analysis were guided by the primary phenomenological question: what is the essence of the visitor experience to The Rocks/Darling Harbour?

#### ***Data collection***

Data were collected by in-depth interview in both precincts. To qualify for an interview at The Rocks, participants had to be either international tourists or Australian residents from outside of Sydney. Based on the earlier Rocks study, the sample for Darling Harbour was broadened to include Sydney-based residents. Given the relatively small number of Sydney (and NSW regional) residents in the Darling Harbour sample, the differences between the two sites based on the impact of Sydneysiders in particular, and NSW residents in general, are likely minor.

In both study precincts, data were collected at the respective visitors' centres. Visitors were encouraged to participate by the offer of two bottles of Australian wine. Volunteer respondents were informed of the time involved (up to one hour) and permission was sought to tape record the interview. Interviews took place over three-day periods in March 2001 (The Rocks) and October 2002 (Darling Harbour).

#### ***The samples***

The Rocks sample consisted of 20 interviews involving 31 participants. Eleven participants were interviewed individually, seven in pairs and two in groups of three. At Darling Harbour 36 interviews were conducted involving 59 participants. Fourteen were interviewed individually, 21 in pairs and one in a group of three.

In both studies, first names - for the ease of later identification on the tapes; age - in ten-year bands; and place of origin were collected. An overview of the participants in both studies is outlined in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: Age of Participants**

Age Band	The Rocks	Darling Harbour
20 – 29yrs	10	24
30 - 39yrs	6	10
40 - 49yrs	1	7
50 - 59yrs	6	9
60 plus	8	9
Totals	31	59

**Table 2: Place of Origin**

Origin	The Rocks	Darling Harbour	
USA/Canada	12	5	
UK/Ireland	5	17	
Europe	10	10	
New Zealand		3	
Australia (other)	3	17	
NSW –regional			1
Sydney		3	
Other	1	3	
Totals	31	59	

### ***Approaching the interpretation of data***

In accord with the suggestions of Van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994) and Crotty (1996) the first 'level' of analysis undertaken was thematic. The three approaches recommended by Van Manen (1990) were used.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

### ***Analysing the data: a thematic approach***

Developing themes implicitly implies a process of data reduction – the narrative is pulled apart, disconnected and then reassembled. The process of theme development is a dialectical process between the text, the researcher and the act of writing.

In the context of the current work, the themes and their respective categories (or 'sub themes') have emerged from an amalgam of ideas garnered through studies of four separate precincts: The Rocks and Darling Harbour - Sydney; Federation Square and



the Southbank Promenade – Melbourne. The latter two studies (Griffin, Hayllar and King 2006) led to a refinement of the themes that evolved from the earlier work. Subsequent to these studies, data from The Rocks and Darling Harbour were then re-examined and refined. It should be noted that the ‘new’ themes as outlined in Table 3 represent more a clarification and sharpening of language rather than fundamental shifts in our evolving understanding of the experiential character of precinct visitation.

**Table 3: Themes and Categories**

Major Themes	Definitions	Categories
PHYSICAL FORM	Architectural and other physical features of the precinct and the extent which such form(s) implicitly or explicitly shape activity	Setting/Fabric Location Activity
ATMOSPHERE	Overall ‘feel’ of the precinct, created by the dialectical interaction of the social and personal experiences of the visitor	Social Experience Contrast Personal Experience
MEANING	How the individual’s collective experiences provide some sense of personal meaning for their visit	External Internal

In the following analysis, the first names of participants have been noted. Direct quotes have been placed in italics and the line numbers from the text noted; viz (ln.x). The line numbers provide an audit trail back to the individual texts located within the software (NVIVO) master documents.

**Theme 1: Physical Form**

*Physical form* refers to the architectural and other physical features of the precinct and the extent to which such form(s) implicitly or explicitly shape activity.

**Setting/Fabric**

The Rocks and Darling Harbour present themselves as strikingly different architectural forms. The historic yet evolved streetscape of The Rocks with its low rise, more human scale 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings is archetypal.

The architecture links Sydney to its colonial past. Amanda (ln. 48) thought that the *monuments and the buildings are very English*, while Angus (ln. 97-98) noted the cultural

connections when he commented that the *architecture is quite colonial and that you notice the kind of old fashioned buildings*. May (ln. 111-113) noticed the changes over time: *You can see the difference. You can see the different years. I don't mean separate years but you can see where they've had a different style or they've added a building. You can see all the different parts; that's good.*

Interestingly, there was little comment on the precinct's relationship to the adjacent Sydney Harbour. Like many places of its type, The Rocks turns its back on the harbour. The setting is inward looking toward the street and its associated activity. Given its close proximity to the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Sydney Opera House this perspective likely enhances the historic 'feel' of the precinct sheltered as it is from nearby modernist icons.

Darling Harbour contrasts markedly with The Rocks in both architectural fabric and setting. The 'festival market place' style is somewhat of a discordant mix of building types and forms. Its buildings are invariably described as modern and are arranged to take maximum advantage of the harbourside location. Carolina (ln.73-76) was effusive about the buildings, *beautiful, beautiful, beautiful...very modern....*The mix of types was commented upon by many respondents such as Christie and Brian (ln. 218-219) *who noted the very different mix of buildings – quite cosmopolitan*. However, the somewhat eclectic layout did not appeal to all. Abbey and Hannah (ln. 189-197) noted:

*Well you've got northern parts and then you've got the basin, the cafes and...then you've got that expensive social bit...and then you've got a childrens' playground, and then you've got an information bit...there's no theme as a whole harbour area.*

Barry and Margaret's comments epitomised those of many respondents who valued the harbourside setting nearby the *beautiful harbour* (ln. 94-95) and *the people, the boats and the water, just love it, absolutely brilliant* (ln. 170-172).

### **Location**

The location of both precincts is pivotal to the experience of visitors. The Rocks is adjacent to the main tourist hub of the city. Coach companies, harbour tour operators, major hotels and the city metro are within easy walking distance. The Rocks are also close to the CBD and its offices and shopping areas. It is surrounded by vibrant inner city life and tourist activity. Indeed its relative quietness, its change of pace, and its scale, are in sharp contrast to its near surrounds.

Like The Rocks, Darling Harbour's location appears central to defining its character and the experience of visitors. Unlike The Rocks it is open space in the city and oriented to the water. The open water views of sailing and other recreational craft, the working harbour activity and the northern suburbs of Sydney hugging the distant shoreline position Darling Harbour as a window to a quintessential Sydney experience. Ian (ln. 147-151) notes that *it fits in with the rest of Sydney, it's sitting on the harbour which is one of the main attractions...I think its fits with the rest of the city*. Jill (ln. 152-154) also commented that, *water's a very big part of Sydney* a point reinforced by Sally and Rob (ln. 703-772) who argued that people *just want to be near water. I don't know why it is, I don't know whether people like the sound and the lapping of waves...*Yvette too (ln. 99-101) sees the water in the context of its location: *You don't feel obviously it's like being*

*in the city, no. I think a lot of that's got to do with the water 'cause everything's worked around the water.*

### **Activity**

The level and type activity is a substantial point of contrast between the two precincts. The Rocks is a more 'urbanised' experience. For many visitors, The Rocks is a place to meet, eat, drink and to purchase goods – the latter with a specifically Australian identity.

In contrast to the more organic activity in The Rocks, *Play it your way* is the SHFA developed theme for Darling Harbour. There are numerous tourist attractions, ongoing themed events (such as *Fiesta*), open-air concerts, children's play areas and open space for 'promenading' along the water front – all in addition to the ubiquitous restaurants and cafés. The responses highlight the diverse nature of activity in Darling Harbour:

*It is a big entertainment centre* (Andy and Christian : In.126).

*There is so much to see* (Barry and Margaret : In.22-25)

*It's all leisure. People sort of passing through, sort of strolling through...*(Bob and April : In.238-241)

### **Theme 2: Atmosphere**

The Atmosphere refers to the overall 'feel' of the precinct created by the dialectical interaction of the social and personal experiences of the visitor.

#### **Social experience**

Like other forms of leisure behaviour, visiting a precinct is inherently a social experience. The Rocks visitors acknowledge the social aspects of their experience in general terms but in particular note the social context of their experience. The Rocks is an urban melting pot of international tourists, domestic tourists, local residents, office workers and Sydney residents 'in town' for the day. Joyce (In.454-455) recognised the 'living' Rocks which is *like a community, not just like packed up when people leave at night; it doesn't just shut down*. The living community gives The Rocks a unique character *where people are walking here and there, going to work and then you have people who are just strolling around* (Darlene: In.235).

Unlike The Rocks, the social aspects of Darling Harbour were less context focussed. The prevailing theme here was concerned with the social nature of the precinct. A place for meeting; a place for families; a place to 'do' things; together. *It's a people place* (Bob and April: In.272-275). While the image of the 'living community' is not as marked as in The Rocks, Darling Harbour nevertheless conveys the image that it is part of the city, not apart from the city. Michael and Nancy encapsulated the ideas of many others when they noted that *if you want to go to a tourist resort you go to a tourist place but this is a city so you expect to see normal people doing normal things* (In.114-116).

#### **Contrast**

Contrast refers to the extent to which the atmosphere is shaped by the juxtaposition of the precinct with its surrounds. In both precincts, visitors expressed ideas concerning the

difference of the precinct with the remainder of the city. In The Rocks, the contrast is one of scale, pace and style – smaller buildings, a slower more relaxed pace, and an old world style. Nierke (In.87-89) eloquently captures the sentiment in what she called *its more human measure*.

In Darling Harbour the dominant theme is one of space and openness - a place where you can take things slower and not walk into people. *It's out of the city but it's in the city. Its got its own little atmosphere* (Gloria and Graham: In. 116-118). The type of space is also a point of contrast. The adjacent harbour creates a sense of space and contrast as do the park areas with grass and gardens. Like The Rocks there is humanness to space in contrast to the backdrop of the city. As Maureen and Alf argue *I think it's important to have a wee bit of space in a city, it makes it feel better* (In.257-258).

### **Personal experience**

The final category in this theme, personal experience, relates to how visitors described their general feelings and level of engagement with the precincts.

There were similarities in both. Being in a city but being withdrawn from its post-modern sensibilities provides individuals with feelings of relaxation and peacefulness albeit ascribed from different social and physical characteristics. The Rocks' narrow streets, its living precinct character, and human interactions convey a particular type of experience, in part a sense of timelessness. While ostensibly a place of activity, Darling Harbour also radiates a type of calmness *because you come down here and you've got the water there and it's a bit more laid back and a bit more, kind of 'ahh', a bit more relaxing. You can sit down and take a breath...*(Sally and Rob: In.81-85)

A notable point of contrast is the younger 'feel' of Darling Harbour. Older respondents recognised that the changing pace of the precinct in the evening made it a place for young people to come out and enjoy themselves. While they feel safe and secure in the precinct there is also a sense that they know when to disengage.

Overall there is a resonance in the language of positive feelings toward both precincts. These are areas of different character and style from which visitors draw personally meaningful experience. This sense of meaning is developed further in the following section.

### **Theme 3: Meaning**

The final theme is concerned with how an individual's cumulative experiences and level of engagement provide some sense of personal meaning to their visit. In the sense described here, meaning is examined at two levels. The first is concerned with the meaning the precinct gives to the 'host' city itself; as a marker for Sydney as a destination. This category we have labelled as external. The second relates to the more inward-looking, or internal meaning, attributed to the individual by their experience.

#### **External**

In both precincts there is an unambiguous sense that visitors are experiencing 'Sydney' but in manifestly different ways. Both are measures of distinctiveness. At The Rocks,

visitors recognise they are moving in the environs of old Sydney and do not appear to be concerned with what might be considered the imposition of the modern or 'inauthentic'. Indeed Wang's (1999) notion of 'existential authenticity' (in Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000:17), where authenticity lies in the experience not the object, is relevant to this group of visitors.

Darling Harbour provides a different marker. Here the experience is one of a modern Sydney. However, Darling Harbour's design, and particularly its location, mark it out as a quintessentially Sydney, ergo post-modern Australian, city – informal, relaxed and open - a place of light, colour, space and movement. As Tanya notes, *I mean it is comparatively similar to an equal city in the US and so, but when I go, when I come here I feel like I'm in Sydney, I feel like I am somewhere else* (ln.138-141).

### **Internal**

Respondents at both sites expressed positive 'feelings' toward their experience. They felt 'safe', 'comfortable', 'less stressed', and 'not hassled'. However, these expressions were more marked in reference to The Rocks. It could be that the greater 'depth' and complexity of the environment in The Rocks provided a richer experiential foundation for meaningful reflection. Indeed support for this observation is provided in our Melbourne precinct studies (Griffin, Hayllar and King, 2006).

### ***Phenomenological reflection: the essence of experience***

The analysis now moves toward a more phenomenological explication of the data; an engagement with the essence of experience.

The themes developed above primarily reflect the experiential structures of the precinct experience. However, essences are not particular actions, interactions or components within the physical and social environment. Rather an essence is a 'construct' that arises from the individual interaction with those components, i.e. how the phenomenon is experienced (the experience of experience). Thus developing essences is a reconstructive or constructive act (Denzin, 1989).

Moving from the experiential structures to essence involved a process of reading and reworking the ideas expressed within the texts to explicate the inherent 'whatness' of the identified themes. Questions such as the following guided this reflective process. Is there embedded within the precinct experience a phenomenon that links and flows through the experience? Is there an essence without which the experience of the precincts (as understood by the participants in this study) would cease to exist? In responding to these rhetorical questions we engaged in a process of thinking through the phenomenological character of the work to date. Further we engaged in a discursive process of data analysis and discussion between co-researchers.

In the context of The Rocks, emerging from these dialectical processes was a sense of the contested notion of *place* (see Relph, 1976; Agnew, 1987; Massey, 1994). This has been previously reported (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005). However, our revisiting of the data in the course of the current study has confirmed the original analysis. What then of Darling Harbour? Again, we would argue that *place* is the essence of that experience.

In the context of Darling Harbour (and The Rocks) *place* encapsulates the affective domain of experience through the thematic notion of Atmosphere; *place* is psychologically experienced through the dialectical interactions with self, others and the precinct space. A further affective dimension emerges within the theme of Meaning. As recognised within the thematic categories, there is a type of phenomenological dualism between *place* as the experiential 'marker' of a city (external) and *place* as an experience (internal) of the precinct i.e. what it means to the individual visitor.

*Place* also resonates with the affective, cognitive and psychomotor domains in consideration of the human interaction with the Physical Form. In so doing, questions such as: how do I make sense of this form; what does the physical form convey about the precinct; how does the physical form impact upon my experience; and what opportunities for personal action does the physical form imply, are sub-consciously dealt with and acted upon in the course of the experience.

Taken together, the differing physical form, atmosphere and meaning offered by both precincts produce a similar phenomenological experience - a sense of place.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Theorising place***

The phenomenon of place emerged somewhat unexpectedly within the context of Darling Harbour given that precincts of this type are often referred to pejoratively. For example, Clark (1991) in Craig-Smith and Fagence (1995) noted the similarities between the Baltimore Inner Harbor Area and Darling Harbour complaining that these developments were becoming clones of one another. In a similar vein, Rowe and Stevenson (1994:181) argue that "festival marketplaces involve the calculated packaging of time and space, seeking to satisfy tourists' expectations of an authentic experience of place by constructing often decontextualised and sanitised simulations of urban landscapes", and further that these types of precincts resonate with the "urbanism of universal equivalence so that anywhere can now be everywhere." However, our data suggest that the experience of visitors to Darling Harbour runs counter to this 'conventional wisdom'. It is not simply the 'carnavalesque' (Bruner, 2004) with its implied superficiality and depthlessness – it is somewhere! Some possible explanations of this phenomenon will now be explored.

In theorising *place* within The Rocks (Hayllar and Griffin, 2005), we invoked the work of the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1973). Using Schutz's notions of 'finite provinces of meaning' and 'paramount and non-paramount realities', we maintained that the characteristics of the historic precinct provided a meaningful architectural and cultural counterpoint to the adjacent city while the experience itself effectively engaged the visitor to suspend their disbelief. As Schutz (1970: 252) argued, it is the "meaning of our experiences, and not the ontological structure of objects, which constitutes reality". The maintenance of this experiential reality rests on the extent to which the precinct itself sustains its non-paramount character. For example, a clash of architectural form, the intrusion of external noise, or 'out of character' social action may challenge the phenomenon being experienced. While Schutz's ideas have meaning within this discussion, in particular those on the nature of reality, the Darling Harbour

experience might be alternatively theorised from the phenomenological ideas of the influential Norberg-Schulz (1963, 1980).

Norberg-Schulz was one of the key theorists of the concept of *genius loci* from which the ideas of 'sense of place' evolved. According to Jackson (1994) in Jiven and Larkham (2003: 68) 'sense of place' is an "awkward and ambiguous translation of the Latin term *genius loci*." While the interpretation of the term has moved over time "we now use the current version to describe the *atmosphere* to a place, the quality of its environment...we recognise that certain localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being..."

Norberg-Schulz (1980) was influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger. However, it is Heidegger, and his ideas on pre-industrial life and landscape that appear formative. In Norberg-Schulz's conceptualisation of *genius loci*, four thematic levels are recognised:

the topography of the earth's surface;  
the cosmological light conditions and the sky as natural conditions;  
buildings;  
symbolic and existential meanings in the cultural landscape.  
(Jiven and Larkham, 2003: 70)

This conceptualisation has particular relevance to Darling Harbour as it implicitly acknowledges the interplay of topography, light, architecture and the cultural landscape in formulating an intersubjective sense of place. Thus, while place is socially constructed (Knox, 2005), Norberg-Schulz's work acknowledges the centrality of the natural aesthetic in formulating this construct – an aesthetic recognisable within the experience of visitors to Darling Harbour.

Accordingly, we contend that while a sense of place is maintained by a type of inward looking 'cohesive reality' within The Rocks, in the case of Darling Harbour, place manifests itself from a more outward looking, dialectical association with its setting and cultural meanings as argued through the ideas of *genius loci*.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have compared and contrasted the experience of visitors in two contrasting precincts using a phenomenological analysis. Our analysis and interpretation highlights the ways in which the physical and social attributes of a precinct shape the experience of visitors. Importantly we contend that while a precinct may be outwardly dissimilar, such differences don't of themselves produce a different phenomenological outcome.

Our theorising on place, and the types of experiences, interactions, environments and design characteristics that manifest themselves in the phenomenon remains a work in progress. A more complete understanding should emerge as further precincts are investigated and the experiences of visitors better understood. Indeed, understanding the experience of visitors in all forms of precincts has both theoretical and practical implications.

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