

# Play about Place: Expanding the impact of Indigenous-led Creative Placemaking after COVID

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## Abstract

This panel explores new approaches to placemaking through the development of urban play projects led by Indigenous practices that connect with and entangle knowledge with place. Cases studies discuss affordable and engaging experiences that activate existing public spaces, a typology and methodology for analysing the impacts of urban play, and a comparative study of urban play in Narrm/Melbourne and Ōtautahi/Christchurch. Impacts of these projects include First Peoples storytelling experiences, city activation post-pandemic, community engagement, and the potential of ‘creative placemaking’ to make cities more inclusive and resilient post-pandemic.

## Keywords

ecologies of place, urban play, First Peoples, placemaking, augmented reality, posthumanism, pervasive games, Indigenous futures, creative practice research

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for cities to be responsive and resilient. Local green spaces, public spaces and neighbourhood streets have all provided support and engagement for people during a period of crisis and upheaval, bringing the importance of local public space into renewed focus. The pandemic has also revealed public spaces and their management to be more flexible and adaptable than previously thought. Parklets have emerged as temporary but tangible interventions into streets as pop-up sites for dining, public gathering and play. [1] [2] Meanwhile the rules and regulations of what can happen in public have shifted more rapidly than ever before. [3] Although cities are increasingly understood as dynamic ‘processes’ and ‘assemblages’ [4] [5], the next several years represents a critical transition period for cities as they become reimaged and reinvented in the pandemic’s wake. A global survey of 31 cities [6] profiling the adaptation of local public spaces in a global pandemic revealed a multitude of possibilities for post-pandemic urban design, while a report on the lived experience of cities post-pandemic [7] revealed a renewed relationship between people and place post-pandemic. Moving away from the ‘city as problem’, this project investigates the ‘city as solution’ through creative placemaking based on urban play.

Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world offer new epistemologies [8], often circular ways of thinking that connect the human, the animal, and the technological—they are already posthuman. In this context, the technological is not defined in the typical sense of digital technologies but rather place-based knowledges that connect language, maps of place, visual communication, design objects and stories to form technological systems that encode knowledge into place in complex and sophisticated ways. These knowledges overlap with many of the objectives of locative media art and ubiquitous media and precede these more recent technologies by several millennia. Reconciling these two knowledge systems that coexist in contemporary urban environments recognises the impact of Indigenous place-based knowledge and in doing so may also contribute to the development of digital place-based technologies.



Figure 1. Players encounter the Ngargee Tree in St Kilda led by narration by N’arweet Carolyn Briggs with visual art by Jarra Karalinar Steel and music by Allara Briggs-Pattison. ©64 Ways of being

Considered within the relationships between urban design and urban life, these methods provide another approach to disrupting and critiquing public space. Considerations of the world building capacities of games and intersections with urban play are central to the hybrid practice of ‘reworlding’. Reworlding is speculative and relational world building, focusing on nurturing and developing existing patterns in

culture, the environment, and society; evolution over revolution.

Place is resilient, diverse, and dynamic. COVID has reshaped cities, and this presents an immediate and once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The pandemic has seen an unprecedented reclamation of urban space, with pedestrians taking precedence over cars. Streets have become places for community and recreation—the rapid development of parklets for al fresco dining is one example of this. Old models of urban design and development no longer apply—temporary is the new permanent. Cities are shaped by many forces, including Indigenous placemaking, the creative economy, communication, cultural policy, challenges of design, citizenship and community, urban informatics, culture, climate change, street art, digital architecture, creative infrastructure, the more-than-human, digital placemaking, migration, community participation, and waterways.



Figure 2. Players engaged in a collective reworlding of Collingwood, Melbourne after urban exploration set in Narrm Melbourne 2050. ©Troy Innocent

Play is a joyous, exciting, fun way to encourage urban inclusivity. Connection to place is now more fractured than ever due to the impact of the pandemic, revealing a wide range of factors that influence people's participation and engagement with public spaces. [9] [10] The pandemic and its associated social distancing requirements, outdoor exercise regulations and travel limits highlighted the importance of accessibility, liveability, walkability and safety to daily life. But it also drew attention to less tangible qualities of daily life that had previously been taken for granted, such as community, sociability and civic identity. [11] [12] [13] This has spurred local governments across Australia to invest significant resources into placemaking strategies and policies connected to economic activation that improve community connection and social wellbeing. Inspired by approaches such as tactical urbanism and urban play, these strategies have become bolder and more experimental in response to the pandemic. Rather than return to normal, the next several years represent a crucial window to capitalise on this moment and seize the potential to embed creative placemaking into long-term city planning models. This overarching research question of this panel asks to what extent can **playful creative placemaking initiatives encourage people back**

**into public space post-pandemic and post-disaster;** and how initiatives that **adopt approaches led by Indigenous practices that connect with and entangle knowledge with place improve the social and cultural life of cities?** [14] [15] *Play about Place* will explore three main topics through case studies and examples of creative placemaking in practice:

**Topic 1 - Understand emergent co-design methodologies in creative placemaking and urban play:** analyse and understand co-design methodologies that have emerged in response to the pandemic, including creative placemaking initiatives that are city-sponsored, community-initiated, or developed by artists and designers working with public space.

**Topic 2 – Expand opportunities for creative placemaking and urban play at scale:** develop, test and establish a framework for local government to deploy urban play at scale. This new knowledge will be shared via an industry resource that offers practical recommendations and actions to embed these activities into urban design and planning.

**Topic 3 – Evaluate the impact of creative placemaking and urban play on social and economic wellbeing:** evaluate impacts in Narrm/Melbourne and Ōtautahi/Christchurch through an innovative methodology. This will be the first study of urban play and its impacts at scale and aims to establish benchmarks and criteria to inform future development in the discipline.

*Play about Place* explores case studies with six partners across two cities—RMIT's Future Play Lab, City of Port Phillip, City of Stonnington, Christchurch City Council, ChristchurchNZ and creative social enterprise Gap Filler.

Panellists will discuss:

- *Reworlding: Play The World We Want:* urban role-play set in a near-future setting that invites players into speculative play with near-future cities of 2050 informed by reciprocal, regenerative and symbiotic relationships to place
- *Kummargii Yulendj:* an urban adventure exploring lost markers with Boon Wurrung elder N'arweet Carolyn Briggs. Connections between a tree, a rock, a beach are remade through Kummargii Yulendji (rising knowledge in Boon Wurrung), an increasing awareness of the ways in which Indigenous knowledges are central to the regeneration of our natural environments
- *ngurrak barring:* occurring across 39 kilometres of walking track, ngurrak barring invites players to explore the natural wonders, rich histories and cultural offerings of the region
- *TIMeR:* an Augmented Reality audiowalk featuring stories of land, river and sky with Boonwurrung elder N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs AM. Participants are transformed into wayfarers as they move across

the RMIT campus to uncover alternate cartographies bringing new insights to familiar routes

- *Walking backwards into the future*: a creative placemaking project situated in Ōtautahi Christchurch exploring Māori language and storytelling to reconnect people and place

Together, these examples explore creative placemaking as a contested but increasingly widespread approach for including artists in traditionally top-down urban renewal and development projects. [16] It “champions artistic projects made in public settings, rather than funding artists to create master-works in isolation”. [17] Despite support packages and job-keeper schemes, the pandemic has decimated the

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arts and culture sector in Australia with lockdowns and capacity limits cancelling or severely restricting events and performances. [18] Creative placemaking provides an innovative way for policymakers to engage underemployed creatives from varied fields and disciplines by bringing their skills to current needs and challenges for placemaking, public space and culture. With the design and regulation of public spaces in a state of flux, and local, state and international governments adapting to the return of public gathering and travel, the next few years present a crucial opportunity for embedding creative placemaking into post-pandemic reconstruction of arts, culture and public space.

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