

# Small Things in Everyday Places: Homelessness, Dissent and Affordances in Public Space

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In ‘a world that has been built to accommodate only some’ (Ahmed 2019: 221), how do those engaging in public protest or experiencing housing insecurity make use of the material environment? In this article, we examine adaptation of the built environment in four sites in Melbourne, Australia. Everyday urban places are composed of myriad ‘small things’ acted upon as affordances for survival within structures of silencing and dispossession for the urban undercommons. We draw from cultural, spatial and atmospheric criminology to inform an ethnographic method focusing on materiality, use, adaptability and sensory composition. In so doing, our research contributes to criminological understanding of the significance of ‘minor’ events, activities and encounters in everyday life by proposing that ‘small things in everyday places’ constitute potentialities for defiance and resistance.

**KEY WORDS:** affordance, adaptive use, the undercommons, public protest, homelessness

The scaling of crime on a continuum means that criminological attention may overlook ‘small’ criminal occurrences that are part of everyday life. State crime, mass crimes and violent crime all have inherent qualities of severity, gravity or scope that compel sustained attention. However, as Valverde writes: ‘scale itself is as much qualitative as quantitative’ (2009: 142) and ‘highly local (and “local” not just in the sense of quantitatively small) scales of governance persist alongside, and are intertwined with, national and international scales of governance’ (2009: 143). Such local occurrences merit consideration alongside those categorised as serious, and this article engages with examples of apparently minor activities and small events. In so doing, we show that for the marginalised groups constituting the urban ‘undercommons’ (Harney and Moten 2013), ostensibly ‘small’ things are essential affordances of everyday survival within structures of silencing and dispossession.

## UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY SPACES CRIMINOLOGICALLY

Ferrell *et al.* argue for the necessity of challenging 'the false dichotomy between crimes large and small', since 'sometimes progressive social change percolates in the little moments of everyday experience, as one small act of resistance to the daily routine, to the micro-circuits of social control, sets the stage for the next' (2015: 91). Here, we concentrate on the 'minor' end of the criminological scale to think further about the significance of some small things in everyday places. Our thinking about minor conduct draws on Dimou and Ilan's proposition that everyday life is filled with examples of 'proto-political' affective connection (2018: 2) and on the literature around affordances, use and adaptation (Norman 1988; Ahmed 2019; Goldsmith *et al.* 2020) to examine a series of sites in Melbourne, Australia. As part of an ongoing research project on spatial justice, we have been investigating adaptive illicit use between May and November 2021 in locations in Melbourne, Australia, used by people who lack stable housing and people who engage in political protest.

Such an approach is located at a nodal point connecting three criminological paradigms. Our thinking takes flight from the pioneering insights of *cultural criminology* (Ferrell *et al.* 2004; 2015), and more recent extensions into visual criminology (see Ferrell 2017; Pauwels 2017; Brown and Carrabine 2019; McClanahan 2021) which emphasise that meaning is relational, and that the everyday is a crucial site for both control and resistance. Hayward and Young posit that crime and crime control are both 'creative constructs' that must be placed in the contexts offered by culture (2004: 259), and that when '[w]atching people on the street, we can catch little shadows of last night's television crime drama, and all those that came before it' (Ferrell *et al.* 2015: 87). Drawing on the work of sociologist Joe Moran (2005), Young argues that the impact of lockdown during the covid-19 pandemic is knitted into the texture of everyday urban places (2021b: 23). Just as Whyte in 1943 argued that the (sub)cultural interactions of young men in everyday places engendered a 'street corner society' for each other, so Ferrell *et al.* propose that 'to study everyday transgression, or more specifically to study the emergent and often amplified meaning of everyday transgression, is to study the political economy of power' (2015: 87–8). To this body of work, our research contributes a focus on the ways that mundane and unremarkable locations in city streets offer valuable opportunities for adaptive use by marginalised groups and individuals.

To consider everyday places in city streets we have also drawn on a second paradigm: *spatial criminology*. Although criminologists have long been interested in places such as cities, neighbourhoods and street corners, the articulation of an ontology around space has taken longer to emerge. Reconceptualising place and location as dynamic and productive allows criminology to think through their significance both in understanding crime and in defining what space might mean. In an agenda-setting article, Hayward (2012) argued that spatial criminology is a necessary development of cultural criminology, and engenders a multi-dimensional epistemology of crime's places.

Following Hayward's argument, there has been a rapid expansion in the shape and texture of criminological research on place, including analysis of the carceral and regulatory aspects of cartography (Kindynis 2014; Aharon-Gutman 2021; Wuschke *et al.* 2021), a broadened conceptualisation of spatial senses (Kindynis 2019; McClanahan and South 2020; Russell and Carlton 2020; Wall 2020; Young 2021a; De Souza and Russell 2022) and engagement with the affective dimensions of spatiality, described by Hayward as an 'affective wash that soaks everyday spatiality' (2012: 449). Campbell argues in favour of a 'detailed analysis of the affective power of "crime" and its capacity to bring the city into being' (2013: 21). Existing 'somewhere between or before experience and cognition' (Young 2019: 766), affect is not isomorphous with emotion: it is better conceptualised as a potentiality that allows the generation of social values named through various emotional responses (both condemnatory and laudatory).

To these two paradigms can be added a third, which situates criminological interest in *atmosphere* within the burgeoning conceptualisation of affect. Described by Fraser and Matthews as a ‘spatialised feeling’ (2019: 2), atmosphere can usefully be thought of as the mesh encircling human subjects and linking them to the spaces they inhabit: ‘atmospheres are generated by bodies ... affecting one another as some form of environment is produced’ (Anderson 2009: 80). Comprising design elements, materials, buildings and infrastructures, individuals, memories and conduct, as an analytical concept atmosphere offers ways of connecting across and between cultural and spatial criminologies (see e.g. Kindynis 2021).

Since atmospheres are ‘the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge’ (Anderson 2009: 78), we can think of urban spaces as generating cultural, spatial and atmospheric relations for individuals. These relations might be between humans, or between humans and non-human elements of an environment. We can thus account for affective attachments between property owner (human subject) and land (non-human subject), as well as the intensity of some regulatory responses to relatively insignificant social infractions.

Our research examines ways in which culture, space and affect meet in particular atmospheric places. These places are humble, unremarkable. Since ‘myriad everyday interactions’ in ordinary places can reveal much about law enforcement (Young 2021a: 2), we have focused on four mundane places typical of city spaces and everyday life: a hotel, the steps of two municipal buildings and a shop. As Stewart puts it, ‘affective qualities emanate from the assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday sites’ (2007: 80). In understanding a series of small things in these everyday places, our research has sought to ‘fuse precise visual attentiveness with politically charged analysis’ (Hayward and Presdee 2010: 3), particularly through our focus on how a specific genre of place (the street) has been adapted for use by two different marginalised groups, those without stable housing and those engaging in political protest.

### PUBLIC HOMELESSNESS, PUBLIC PROTEST AND THE ADAPTATION OF SPACE

The forms of everyday and organised protest discussed in this article include marches, sit-ins, vigils and other actions that communicate a range of political views in public space. Their public occurrence distinguishes them from private political expression through advocacy, letters to the editor or the signing of online petitions. Visible homelessness similarly emphasises the public rather than private activities associated with a lack of housing, particularly rough sleeping and the seeking of donations of food or money.

Individuals experiencing public homelessness are often categorised as a distinct group, one that Pospéch (2020) identifies as having categorical visibility (rough sleepers) as well as moral visibility through the dangers they are asserted as posing to (the rest of) the public. Drawing on Rancière (1999), Bassett (2014: 888) claims that, like rough sleepers, protesters do not exist comfortably within a political order and are consigned to ‘in-between spaces’. Lancione (2013) suggests public homelessness can be understood through its ‘horizontal’ entanglement with the street level of cities as well as ‘vertical’ state definitions of homelessness and a host of public order provisions and police powers. Protest is likewise both horizontally and vertically ‘shaped’ and is (de)territorialised in time and place by the state through techniques of crowd dispersals such as ‘kettling’ to control or delegitimise actions (Neal *et al.* 2019). It is also common for police to determine the size, times, routes and tactics tolerated for protests through prior negotiations (Mitchell and Staeheli 2005). Changes in protest control, from negotiated management to strategic incapacitation (Wall 2020), also inform how a streetscape is configured. Protest ‘no-go zones’ (Baker 2008: 13) have been codified into laws such as the recent *Police*,

*Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill* in the United Kingdom. In New South Wales, with passage of the *Roads and Crimes Legislation Amendment Bill*, protests on ‘public roads, rail lines, tunnels, bridges and industrial estates’ (Coggan 2022) are now criminalised, through targeting of protest at everyday infrastructural sites enabling the public’s mobility between home, work and leisure.

Spatial elements of everyday urban places are capable both of inviting illicit behaviour (Quinn and Grove 2018) and of displaying ‘the unassuming affordances of everyday order maintenance’ (Young 2021a: 5). Here, in contrast, we concentrate on the ways in which unauthorised adaptive use discovers the ambiguities of function within urban design, and the ways these can be harnessed by groups who may be excluded from or subjected to intense scrutiny within them.

Adaptive use, according to Ahmed, is a type of ‘queer use’, when function changes but form remains the same: ‘just because something comes to exist for a purpose, we should not confuse what it was intended for with what it is or can be’ (2019: 34, 35). We also heed Amin and Thrift’s argument that while the engineering and design imperatives that underpin every urban place have highly disciplinary consequences for the human subjects within them, each space contains the potential for subversion of the environment, constituting ‘a theatre of promise in a play of power’ (2002: 4).

The potential for subversion can be found in myriad everyday spaces whose intended purposes cannot limit their potential adaptive use. We investigate how the desire or need to use a place for donation-seeking and shelter, or for the communication of political views, generates a material landscape very different to the ‘lawscape’ (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015), in which individuals are expected to opt for a designated official use without imagining alternatives. Despite the suggestions within the lawscape for those experiencing homelessness or those engaging in political protest to recede or disappear, adaptive use reveals ‘a refusal to exercise the terms that lead to one’s own erasure’ (Ahmed 2019: 207). The denizens of the undercommons hold onto ‘the right to refuse what has been refused to [them]’ (Halberstam 2013: 8), creating instances of what Dimou and Ilan call ‘defiance’: ‘the momentary thwarting of a particular institution’, generating an ephemeral ‘proto-politics’ rather than challenging the ‘root causes of ... oppression’ (2018: 14). In the landscape of the undercommons are found numerous examples of adaptive use, whose illicit character renders them an emergent politics—a potentiality. In these places, people walk where they ‘should’ not and sit or sleep where they ‘should’ not. Such a ‘dis-order or wildness’ points to places ‘beyond the structures we inhabit’ (Halberstam 2013: 7).

The undercommons comprises ‘black people, Indigenous peoples, queers and poor people’ and more (Halberstam 2013: 6), akin to Spivak’s ‘subalterns’ (2008). They must find ‘various modes of being and belonging’, with ‘new economies of giving, taking, being with and for’ thanks to ‘dispossession, debt, dislocation and violence’ (Halberstam 2013: 5). Such individuals usually have few resources at their disposal, and their adaptive uses of everyday urban places may well involve illegality. For those without shelter or those without political capital, as Ahmed writes, ‘use can be how a possibility has been restricted’ (2019: 221), arising because other possibilities are occluded (Tonkiss 2013). Understanding how spatial affordances prompt illicit adaptive use therefore allows criminological researchers to question the criminality of unlawful use, given names such as criminal damage, obstruction of the thoroughfare, begging, public nuisance—all of which describe encounters between human and non-human subjects within an urban environment.

### (UN)LAWFUL USE

Analysis of such encounters means situating them within a lawscape which, through stipulating lawful uses within each setting, establishes boundaries beyond which illicit adaptive use

takes place. City spaces are produced by multiple layers of governance, including municipal, State and Federal levels. As Valverde points out, municipal law manages physical, economic and cultural relations through the categories of 'use' and 'amenity' (2005: 38). Space becomes municipally organised according to its desired use-function. Through zoning sites for specific uses, municipalities eliminate the potential for other uses of the site to be lawful (Valverde 2005). Pavements are imagined as maintaining flows of pedestrians rather than facilitating donation-seeking or rough sleeping; Blomley notes how rough sleepers and donation-seekers become seen as moveable parts of the streetscape, facilitating their removal by police (2007). A municipality also governs persons: rough sleepers are managed through protocols dictating how they should lie on the ground or what is to be done to their belongings (Valverde 2005; Young and Petty 2019).

The two municipalities governing the four sites explored in this article (the Cities of Melbourne and Yarra) generate cartographic representations of their territories, using coloured blocks over building outlines to represent zoning ordinances and movement corridors (City of Melbourne 2012; City of Yarra 2018). The zones used by the Cities of Melbourne and Yarra to concentrate commerce and movement include footpaths: the City of Yarra, for instance, uses language such as 'walkway', 'trading activity' and 'kerbside zones' (2013: 6), merging lawful use (walking, trading) with spatial designation. Zoning for use works in tandem with the criminal law governing persons: archaic vagrancy laws criminalising rough sleeping and donation-seeking have been replaced by similarly punitive public nuisance laws or noise regulations in residential areas (Walsh 2006). Municipally managed 'Activity Centres' are also subject to discretionary police powers that move 'troublesome' people away from commercial precincts. The criminal law thus aligns with principles governing property into 'sub-sovereign' modes of spatial governance (Palmer and Warren 2014: 430).

Property law locates the proprietors of places and goods within a network of rights, powers and obligations (Keenan 2010). It also constructs places and things in particular ways: naming structures as residences, offices, warehouses and so on generates a range of uses expected to occur there. Many places and things are rendered inaccessible to those not named as proprietors or are accessible only on condition of the owner's permission. Valverde (2005) shows the importance of the ascription of (legitimate) uses to 'zones' in planning law in restricting the activities that can take place there. While there may be no physical or material barrier to diverse uses occurring in the same location, lawful 'uses' can be ontologically invoked as 'normative and legal barriers' with exclusionary effects (Valverde 2005: 52).

Illegitimate use is also the concern of the criminal law, which denotes as criminal ways in which individuals may adapt places or things: the application of paint to a footpath constitutes a crime when done by a protester but not when done by utility workers. The criminality of such activities may depend upon relationships within property law: if an individual has performed deference to property law by seeking permission from a proprietor, then a relationship in property law converts a crime into lawful behaviour.

Authorised uses of city streets may include, as macrological concerns, the circulation of traffic and pedestrians and the provision of spaces for outdoor cafes (Blomley 2010; Valverde 2012). At the micrological level, a stair outside a doorway is conventionally authorised for stepping on when entering or exiting a building; a bike lane is for cyclists' movement through space. But sometimes steps become places for sitting, sleeping or meditating, and a bike lane may be converted into a place in which to stand: when unauthorised encounters take place, they upset both the macrological and micrological intentions for the location.

Four locations in Melbourne were selected: outside the Park Hotel in Carlton, an inner-city suburb just north of Melbourne's central business district (CBD); the entrance to a 7-Eleven



convenience store in Fitzroy, an inner-city suburb in Melbourne; the entrance to one of the municipal buildings used by the City of Yarra, a local government area in Melbourne; and the front steps of the State Parliament in central Melbourne.

The Park Hotel has been a site of regular protest throughout 2021. The Federal government used the building as a detention centre for more than sixty men under the so-called 'medevac' legislation whereby refugees and asylum seekers are transported from offshore detention in Papua New Guinea and on Manus Island to Australia, supposedly temporarily and supposedly for urgent medical treatment (Figure 1). Rallies, marches and a nightly protest were held outside the building; protest activities were suspended during Melbourne's lengthy periods of pandemic lockdown during 2021 but resumed as soon as lockdown was relaxed, until the release of all remaining detainees in March 2022.

In Fitzroy, an inner-city neighbourhood, at an intersection where four lanes of traffic, a tram route, a bus route and a cycle lane converge, there are numerous bars, clothing stores and a 7-Eleven convenience store (Figure 2). The 7-Eleven has been for many years a site utilised by those experiencing poverty and/or homelessness. Sometimes rough sleepers have set up alongside the store's outer walls, while donation-seekers use a raised level at the entrance as a step on which to sit while asking for money or food.

The two government buildings studied feature similar 19th century neo-classical façades with prominent stone steps leading to their (mainly symbolic) public entrances (most pedestrian traffic enters through securitised rear doors). Facing down Bourke Street, one of Melbourne's busiest streets and also located at a major transport node with converging pedestrian, vehicular and mass transit routes, the State Parliament is popular as a site of protest (Figure 3). In contrast, the Fitzroy Town Hall faces a quiet residential street (Figure 4). Despite being located near the local police station, its columns and steps receive little police attention and have been used for shelter by rough sleepers.



Fig. 1 The Park Hotel, Swanston Street, Carlton

## AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF UNAUTHORISED USE

Our initial intention was to map these everyday places in a way that might effectively represent their complexity. But as Kindynis notes, traditional mapping ‘fails to capture the spatial dynamics of crime’ (2014: 230). Peršak and Tulumello further argue that ‘complex issues of spatiality and territoriality have often been reduced to locations and spatial correlations, which do not help much in grasping the complex interrelations among social, cultural, political, economic, and spatial phenomena’ (2020: 3). Counter-mapping initiatives locate in place phenomena that might have been thought unmappable, such as sensations or emotions. Nold *et al.* (2009) sought to map ‘emotional cartography’ in cities such as San Francisco and Stockport, utilising wearable devices to measure galvanic skin responses, and Stollery (2021) developed a map showing the changed soundscape of the covid-19 pandemic. Fileborn (2021) utilised Google Maps to allow participants to represent their self-reported experiences—a spatial visualisation of their memories of a distressing experience, while Tulumello showed how photographic surveys of Palermo together with web-based GIS technologies create maps to visualise the ‘fearscape’ with its enclosures, privatised public space and barriers (2015: 259–61).

For our project, the most productive insights came from Mattern, who notes that maps tend towards macro-scalar extrapolation, and advocates for a method digging into the ‘experiential event horizon’ of a location (2021: 13). Such an approach recognises ‘the particular representational needs of various cartographic subjects and their potential desires for invisibility, for



Fig. 2 7-Eleven convenience store, corner of Brunswick Street and Johnston Street, Fitzroy

refusal' (Mattern 2021: 12). We therefore adopted an ethnographic mapping of illicit adaptive use of the material environment by those experiencing homelessness and those engaging in protest. At each site, in addition to noting physical features and design characteristics, we undertook to 'look and listen and feel around it to grasp all that holds it, sustains it, feeds it' (Mattern 2021: 13). As such, our ethnography delved into micro-scalar documentation of some of the 'countless somethings that make ... nothing imaginable' (Mattern 2021: 13). In doing so, we became aware of the 'affordances' crucial to the sites' adaptation into spaces of rough sleeping or protest.

Urban planning and urban design use the contours of urban spaces to engineer moods and 'nudge' conduct to or away from certain desirable or undesirable outcomes (Norman 1988; Edensor 2015; Hilton *et al.* 2018). Similar ideas are found in crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) discourse and policy (Crowe 2000; Cozens and Love 2015). But human subjects interact with the built environment in ways other than simply being directed or constrained by its contours. Individuals may adapt places for their own ends, counter to its intended purpose. Both strategies of control and productive adaptations emerge from spatial affordances.

The concept of affordance derives from the work of Gibson (1977; 1979, reissued 2015), and points to the relationality of meaning and action for subjects in specific situations. Thus, for instance, if an individual is standing in front of a wall with a panel cut into it, the presence of a levered handle on the panel will afford the individual the option of opening what can then be interpreted as a door. As Hudson (2014) notes, affordances are mutable and transient, and do not function in a determinist way; thus, affordances are not always acted on: the levered handle is not always pressed, and the door may remain closed.

Quinn and Grove (2018) identify environmental features that act as criminogenic 'cues' to action in the context of theft from cars and argue that altering the physical features of a location



Fig. 3 Parliament House, Spring Street, Melbourne



interrupts their affordances for criminal behaviour. Goldsmith *et al.* examine the affordances of a gun and its expected uses (2020: 2), commenting that while it is possible, although unlikely, to utilise a gun as a paper weight, a gun would be perceived as use-less as a floating bath toy (2020: 4). In this article, we examine instances where individuals respond to material or environmental affordances in ways that are contrary to their expected use, creating illicit adaptive uses.

To identify affordances, we needed a method able to deliver information about the material environment. Ethnographic forays garnered details about locational colour palette, texture, nearby buildings and broader context and captured other senses such as sound, touch and smell. Rather than engaging with individuals as a means of understanding their spatially located actions (Ferrell 1998; Streule 2020), our ethnographic method followed Jefferson (2021), Kindynis (2019) and Raymen (2019) in focusing upon places occupied or used by human subjects in order to analyse the relationality of that environment to illicit adaptive behaviour. The study consequently involved 'sites' rather than human participants as the object of interest. Locations were documented by various means, including repeated site visits at different times of the day and night, 'hanging out' to observe location features, photodocumentation, field notes and sketches. Lockdowns were repeatedly imposed during the period of the fieldwork, initially seeming to be brief interruptions (e.g., two weeks in June 2021), but which then lasted from 15 July until 22 October 2021.

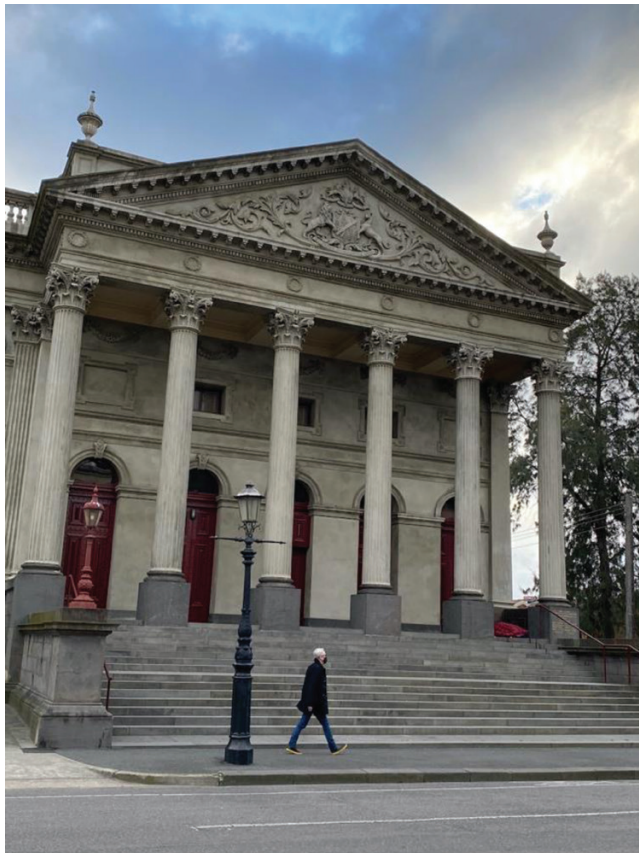


Fig. 4 Fitzroy Town Hall, Napier Street, Fitzroy

Initial ethnographic observation involved 'receptive' walking around selected neighbourhoods. Receptive walking is distinct from the walking undertaken as a methodology in 'mobile criminology', in which human subjects and researchers co-participate in a walk attuned to 'space, place and time' (O'Neill *et al.* 2021: 247), from the ambulatory experiences of 'walking tours' (Pink 2008; Aoki and Yoshizumu 2015) and from everyday pedestrianism (Lorimer 2011). Receptive walking falls somewhere else: walking with an openness to the happenstance of the street and discovery with a spatial awareness beyond that of quotidian ambulation but directed by the perceived concerns of the researcher or writer.

We have borrowed from a tradition within urban research prioritising responsive observation of use (Crouch and Pearce 2020) as well as merging sensory methodologies with walking approaches (Allen 2021), which Pierce and Lawhon describe as the 'iterative exploration and observation of cities on foot' (2015: 655). Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2015: 96) also talks of mapping the lawscape through walking as a mode of engagement with the body, law and the city. Receptive walking allowed us to observe, at street level and on a micrological scale, how unauthorised uses emerge in places governed by municipal ordinance, property and criminal law. Materials gathered from the site visits revealed which situational, material and textural characteristics were adapted and adaptable by people experiencing homelessness or expressing dissenting political views. All four spaces contained zones that subtly signified or demarcated adaptability.

## AFFORDANCES AND ADAPTIVE USE: SITUATING PUBLIC PROTEST AND PUBLIC HOMELESSNESS

Urban spaces generate multiple affordances for adaptive use by people experiencing homelessness and people engaging in public protest. Both illicit and lawful uses exist thanks to the same material qualities within urban spaces. Certain patterns and themes in design were observed at all sites. The most notable was the presence of an *elevated threshold* or other *transitional zones* between building and street. Elevation of an entranceway ensures that individuals separate themselves from the crowd in the street when entering a building, as well as distinguishing street-based activities from those occurring inside a building. Transitional zones, meanwhile, simultaneously soften and underline the boundary between private premises and the publicly accessible street. Transitional zones can also include paths, covered passageways, landscaped areas and open spaces, forming variously subtle or overt types of barriers, boundaries and thresholds.

It is common for many of these site characteristics to be overlapping. For instance, the adaptation of transitional zones, such as steps that separate the threshold of a building from the street, takes place in various ways, including taking advantage of the elevation offered by steps and stairs. At Parliament House, the steps' considerable height affords police officers stationed outside the building an enhanced panorama for surveillance. At the Fitzroy Town Hall, the transitional zone at the front entrance is used for ceremonies and celebrations, and its elevation is exploited as a place from which to display flags and banners by the City of Yarra.

When elevated thresholds are adapted by unauthorised users, they can become things to sit on and things to speak from. Outside Parliament House, protesters use the elevation of the steps to gain enhanced visibility and amplification of voices. Occasionally, the steps have been adapted into seats, as when Extinction Rebellion used them for a 'Meditate for Climate' protest in 2019, and when anti-lockdown/anti-vax protesters used them in the latter months of 2021 (Figure 5). Numerous police officers were observed using the steps as things to sit on in August 2021, resting after an anti-lockdown protest involving many hundreds of protesters. As can be inferred, while the built environment contains commonly found material elements that can be



Fig. 5 Extinction Rebellion protesters, on the steps of Parliament House

adapted for unintended uses, there is significant variation in who is doing the adaptation. The following discussion considers some of these variations, and their consequences.

### The 7-11: minimising inconvenience

In the inner-city neighbourhood of Fitzroy, the 7-Eleven convenience store is located at a bustling intersection. The connecting streets are rarely empty, since this area is designated a 'Major Activity Centre' which includes a night-time entertainment precinct. Outside the convenience store can frequently be found someone seeking donations of food or money.

The store is a favoured site for donation-seeking due to numerous affordances. Convenience stores attract a large number of consumers, many of whom have small change or who are willing to purchase items of food and drink for donation-seekers. Despite its modest size, the tiled promontory at the 7-Eleven's entrance offers numerous potential uses beyond its intended ones. While many urban donation-seekers must sit directly on a pavement, leaning back against an exterior wall for support, here the entryway, intended as a step, readily affords use as a seat. More generally, location within a Major Activity Centre in which commercial premises are dedicated to shopping, eating and drinking and operating throughout the day and night results in a large population of potential donors. Choosing a convenience store as a location for donation seeking means that even if potential donors do not carry cash or small change (a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic is that fewer carry cash, preferring cards), some will offer to buy food or drinks from the 7-Eleven. Finally, only a few metres from the entrance is a tram stop with a nearby bench seat (visible in Figure 2). The proximity of the tram stop means pedestrians moving along the street, in and out of the shop and on and off the tram, are circulating in an ever-changing flow around the donation-seeker.

The store's elevated threshold is the smallest of those at the sites studied—one single step. The shop walls are set slightly back from the pavement on its two corner frontages. At the entrance this setback is increased such that a small triangular lip protrudes forwards from the sliding glass doors (Figure 6). This triangle points directly at the corner where the pavements of Brunswick



**Fig. 6** Donation-seeking at the entrance to the 7-Eleven

Street and Johnston Street meet. At the outer sides of the triangle, there is a visible raised step up from the pavement; in the centre of the triangle pointing towards the corner, however, there is a slope from the raised level of the shop down towards this pavement. This slope, together with the presence of square-edged pillars on either side, encourages shoppers to use the slope for ingress and egress, rather than to step up and down at the sides.

Thanks to sitting close to the ground and below the angle of conventional vision, outside the 7-Eleven the donation-seeker is similarly rendered less visible to pedestrians. Just as tired pedestrians choose the nearby bench as a seat rather than the shop entranceway in order perhaps to distinguish themselves from individuals experiencing homelessness, donation-seekers eschew sitting on the bench at the nearby tram stop: to do so would risk being thought to be occupying space that might otherwise be used by passengers. The presence of donation-seekers at this location is also so commonplace that their absence would be unusual; through frequency of occupation, their presence in the streetscape is rendered less visible and less susceptible to objection or police intervention.

#### **Fitzroy Town Hall: municipal refuge**

The bustle of activity that drives the 7-Eleven's affordances for donation-seeking is not present at the Fitzroy Town Hall, a building constructed in 1873. It had various functions that are now



conducted elsewhere: the building used to contain a courtroom, a registry office and mayoral offices which have been displaced to other locations after the Fitzroy local council was amalgamated into the larger municipality of Yarra. Nowadays the building is mainly used for events and functions. There is little obvious securitisation; the building's architecture, however, deploys tropes of municipal Victorian grandeur along with more mundane devices to separate its land and property from the space of the street. The marker designating the shift from 'pavement' to 'car parking area' is subtle—only a shallow raised level—but painted white lines for parking plus some signage indicating that the building is the Town Hall implies a shift from 'surface used for walking' to 'surface belonging to council'.

Steps rise to a flat level approximately ten feet wide, which extends across the entire front of the building, with six tall pillars standing like teeth on a comb at the top of the stairs to the right and to the left of the building. High, wide doors open from here into the building (Figure 7). As a little-used municipal building, it offers relative quiet within an inner-city neighbourhood and reduces the chances of the rough sleeper being disturbed, moved on, or having belongings disposed of or stolen. The elevation of the steps and the screening effected by the pillars offers seclusion from pedestrian sightlines, as well as the ability to convert the corner of the raised level at the top of the steps into a space of refuge. Tucked behind pillars, bags of belongings are only visible on an oblique angle; sleeping on a surface higher than head height and off to one



Fig. 7 Finding shelter at the Fitzroy Town Hall

side, a rough sleeper is less likely to be spotted by pedestrians, their near-seclusion arising from some paradoxical effects of the building's highly public front façade and entranceway.

### The Park Hotel: an adapted building

Adaptation categorically defines the Park Hotel site. Initially called Rydges, offering medium to high end holiday accommodation in a building run by a popular hotel company, the property was in 2020 co-opted into a location in which to hold returning Australians for 14 days during the covid-19 pandemic through the redesignation of its zoning, from 'hotel' to 'alternative place of detention' (Dehm *et al.* 2021). As has occurred during other pandemics (Elden 2003), a building's previous function was abandoned so it might contain an infectious disease—something that it signally failed to do, with the Victorian second wave of covid cases being seeded from this building (Loughnan 2020; Young 2021b). This adaptive use was then once more adapted: instead of holding returned travellers on order of the State government of Victoria, it was repurposed by the Australian Federal government as a detention centre for seriously unwell refugees being denied entry to Australia.

Adaptation of its architectural affordances (such as individual rooms, lockable doors, an entrance that could be securely shut) allowed it to be transformed from hotel to immigration prison, effacing any interior elements of leisure or pleasure and allowing the immanently carceral aspects of its design to come into sharp relief. Its exterior needed some adjustment: a vertical sign that said 'RYDGES' was haphazardly covered by black tarpaulin, and paper was taped over ground floor windows. The front entrance, with its elevated threshold and transitional covered passage, led only to locked doors and screened windows. Its identity as 'hotel' became no more than a ghostly trace within a building functioning as a place of incarceration. The building is currently empty pending renovation before resuming as a hotel.

Numerous design elements of the hotel were also adapted by individuals protesting its use as a detention centre, chanting 'Close the Park Prison' outside the building. Messages in chalk were written on adjoining pavements, both to the detained individuals inside the building and to draw the issue to the attention of pedestrians. A public park opposite the hotel was also used as a space in which to assemble, broadcast amplified messages and set up trestle tables with leaflets and petitions. A concrete bicycle lane divider, which creates a car-free ribbon of space within the street, was used by protesters as a surface during nightly vigils outside the building (Figure 8). Just wide enough to stand on, almost marooned in the middle of the street, the divider affords a small platform uncontested by other users of the street, allowing vigils to occur in the interstices of authorised uses.

Adaptive use is also a result of and response to police tactics: standing on the cycle lane divider and in the park allows the protesters to challenge allegations of obstructing the footpath. At the hotel, operating from a semi-permanent office with two exits on the side and basement of the building, police created a dynamic (but enforceable) boundary whose porosity seemed to depend on the officers on shift. On some days, protest was allowed on the sidewalk immediately abutting the hotel building; at other times, protest was pushed to the opposite side of the street. The police themselves became a barrier determining proximity to the building, with the road functioning as a permeable border and traversable surface.

Adaptive use can make visible architectures that are otherwise hidden. Having lost its identity of 'hotel', the Park Hotel would fade anonymously into the streetscape were it not for regular protests outside witnessing its occluded (mis-)use. The chalk-written messages on surrounding footpaths and occasionally on the walls of the building were typically washed away the following morning yet traces of them remained long after high-pressure hoses rendered them almost invisible. The detained men, sequestered in their rooms for over two years, appeared at their windows when the protesters arrived on the street—a call-and-response generated when one



Fig. 8 The cycle lane and divider outside the Park Hotel

adaptive use (protest) answers another (detention centre). Each evening at dusk, the men stood at their windows to wave back to protesters, dark silhouettes against the yellow lights of their hotel rooms. Together, the protesters' presence in the street and the detainees' corporeal materialisation made eerily and publicly visible the hidden spectacle of 'offshore detention' within everyday urban places.

### Parliament House: democratic challenges

Users seeking affordances to adapt at Parliament House face a much more public orientation than the other sites. As already noted, protesters often adapt Parliament's grand, and highly visible, steps as places on which to sit or stand. The transitional surface abutting the beginning of these steps lies almost flush with busy Spring Street and is used by commuters going to the entrances of the nearby underground station.

Although, as discussed above, the Fitzroy Town Hall's steps have affordances that support rough sleeping, those without housing tend not to use the steps of Parliament House in this way: police presence is too heavy and the risks of arrest too high. It has therefore been striking that anti-government protesters were permitted, in November 2021, to sleep on the steps as part of their '24/7' protest against the *Public Health and Wellbeing Amendment (Pandemic Management) Bill*, which extended many of the emergency powers used during 2020 and 2021 into non-emergency situations (Estcourt and Morgan 2021): some argued that protesters set up camp with the hopes of 'ambushing' M.P.s to influence their vote on the legislation (Flower 2021). Individuals who unfolded sleeping bags played music, and set up tents on the steps were not asked to leave (Rooney, et al. 2021), despite heavy police presence (Figure 9). One government minister stated: 'They absolutely have the right to demonstrate, and if they choose to spend the next three or four days on the steps of State Parliament, that is entirely a matter for them and it's in their rights to do so' (Deery et al. 2021). Such responses to the protesters prioritised the symbolic role of the Parliament steps as a site where democracy takes place. Unhoused





Fig. 9 Anti-vaccination protesters with signs and tents on the steps of Parliament House

individuals, as opposed to anti-lockdown and anti-vax protesters, tend to avoid the Parliament steps entirely, seeking smaller, less conspicuous sites nearby. Whereas protesters seek visibility for their cause, unhoused individuals must balance their personal visibility when donation seeking so that they do not become a 'problem' that might invite police attention (such as a move-on order or a fine). Despite the perception of affordances for sleep, shelter and extended occupation of the Parliament steps by anti-vax and anti-lockdown protesters, the reluctance of people without housing to adapt the steps for their needs shows that, as Gibson (1977) points out, affordances are relational, emerging as a point of connection between human subject and material environment. That unhoused people do not tend to sleep on the steps of Parliament confirms Hudson's proposition (2014) that the possibility of an affordance does not determine that it will be used by an individual.

### MINOR ENCOUNTERS AND SMALL THINGS: PUBLIC SPACE AND THE UNDERCOMMONS

Our iterative spatial and sensory ethnography discovered numerous examples of easily overlooked features that become affordances for adaptive use at sites occupied by people experiencing homelessness and people engaging in protest. That such features are overlooked is a consequence in part of their relatively small size within the social landscape, being deemed minor aspects of building design, or their utility being minimised within the streetscape. Individuals seeking to adapt a place for their own unauthorised needs look differently at such spaces and are thus able to find the value in the minor features of a building's design. As Harney and Moten (2013) might put it, they are engaged in 'fugitive planning'. Originating in Black studies, 'fugitivity' names and valorises the enterprise of refusing containment within the discourses and institution of hegemonic White society (Moten 2018). The illicit adaptive uses discovered at the four sites evidence fugitive planning by those refusing passivity within the lawscape, instead making active choices that redesign the streetscape for their otherwise unmet needs.



The materiality of city spaces enables adaptation to become visible or invisible as needed by the user. Protesters make visible what they perceive to be injustices, whereas people sleeping rough may choose to withdraw from the public gaze, for privacy or as protection against harassment from the public or police. As Goldsmith *et al.* discuss, the ‘physical properties of objects, as well as other features of settings, provide both *opportunities for, and constraints upon, action*’ (2020: 4, emphasis in original). Authorities’ understanding of affordance in the built environment has resulted in ‘prompts’ for action being increasingly targeted, both in terms of situational crime prevention (Quinn and Grove 2018) and in creating places barren of affordance, not only for crime but also for culture and for random moments of discovery (Raymen 2016: 503). However, creative adaptation of the built environment persists, taking place when users resist the material or cultural contours that prescribe how something must be used.

Ahmed (2019) considers creative adaptation unanticipated in the original design of a building or space to be a ‘queer’ use: ‘how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended’ (2019: 199). Queer use releases the ‘potentiality that already resides in things given how they have taken shape’ (2019: 200). Considering the adaptations of urban affordances by those without homes and by those engaging in protest as *queer* use provides a radical alternative to situational approaches that *limit* affordance, instead extending current uses and always open to future, as yet unimagined, adaptations of a site. In our research we undertook a multilayered analysis, considering law, policy, the sensory landscape and the material texture of public spaces. In some ways, our analysis shows ‘nothing’ (Mattern 2021) since many of the adaptations we have identified are miniscule shifts in and of the space. Yet at the same time, it shows small stitches within ‘the fabric of community’ (Cruz 2020: 22), and reveals individuals making use of places, in ways that variously might challenge business proprietors, residents, police officers and national immigration policies. Such uses are easily (and often) criminalised.

Making visible and legible the barriers, thresholds and occlusions of a site can enable a re-negotiation of those emplacements. As Ahmed puts it, ‘Buildings can be built with queer uses in mind, which is to say, with a commitment to a principle that not all uses could or even should be foreseen’ (2019: 200). In so doing, criminologists might contribute to the process of releasing potentialities in urban places, attending to the needs and communities of the undercommons, who become visible when we notice their spatially adaptive uses of urban places.

In arguing the significance of adaptive use, we offer three contributions to criminological thinking. First, the study of affordances extends sensory criminological inquiry, because linking sites’ affordances to adaptive use help understanding of how people imagine themselves in places. If we have to sleep in a public space, we need shelter to avoid getting wet by rain and enough light for safety but not so bright that sleep is impossible. For sitting on the pavement, a wall to provide support for the lower back is needed and if possible a raised surface for greater comfort in the legs. If chanting slogans at a demonstration, elevation is needed to help people hear better and to be seen. Sensory criminology has studied the dynamism of situations and places (McClanahan and South 2020), and our study concludes that the meaning of places is thoroughly relational and their spatio-sensory dynamism might depend on the smallest of things.

Second, it should be apparent that our aim is not to propose ‘target-hardening’, increased surveillance or expanded policing strategies. We offer a counter-position to that espoused by advocates of CPTED, who emphasise control of environment through its manipulation or municipal policies aiming for public ‘order’. The resulting interventions, such as spikes on raised surfaces to prevent rough sleeping (Petty 2016) or bylaws that prohibit people from congregating in groups, prevent people fulfilling basic needs such as shelter and reduce democratic debate.

Finally, in this article we have argued that the taken-for-granted places found in urban streets are complex and multilayered. Their constitutive layers include the lawscape and its statutes, bylaws and so on; a built environment that focuses on design briefs without acknowledgment of the wide range of needs within a society; and use which activates things and places: through use, all places involve encounters and events. We propose there is much to learn from seeing city spaces like an adaptive user. Adaptive use is a response to failures of conventional planning, criminal justice, politics and social policy. The places where we find examples of Ahmed's 'queer' use or Harney and Moten's 'fugitive planning' provide evidence that something is amiss, people are unhomed, there are gaps in services and support: adaptation thus arises from a public need (here, the need for access to housing and for ways to express dissenting views).

Harney and Moten theorise the differences between planning and policy as they play out in the 'fugitive, ambling neighbourhoods of the undercommons' (2013: 75). 'Planning' is 'the ceaseless experiment with the futural presence of the forms of life that make [everyday] activities possible' – the improvisation that can render a step as a seat, or a pillar a hiding-place for personal belongings. In contrast, 'policy' is a 'renewed dispersal and deputization of state violence' (2013: 75) against those whose adaptive uses situate them in the spaces used by policymakers and by capital: the town hall, the parliament, the convenience store, the hotel. The targeting of protesters and those without housing as problems for municipal policy, criminal law and systems of property allows our focus to remain on *control* of unauthorised users. However, adaptive use is less a social problem and more a form of 'counter-policy' generated through the planning decisions made by the undercommons: can I sit here (yes, and I will), can I stand here with a placard (I think so), can I sleep safely here (I will try to), will I be arrested here (I do not know). The point is not that the presence of individuals experiencing homelessness or individuals engaging in protest present challenges to public order that require criminalisation or prevention. Instead, the significance of these 'small things in everyday places' and innumerable 'minor encounters' (Young 2021b: 999) between human subjects and material environments is that they reveal the struggles in the everyday life of a person without housing or a protester expressing their views in public. Without these small things, both survival on the street and participation in a democracy become harder. As Ahmed emphasises, adaptive use through spatial affordances represents a 'dismantl[ing of] a world that has been built to accommodate only some' (2019: 221).

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