

# Voice, Vibe & Vision

RESEARCH PROJECT SUMMARY



## Acknowledgement of Country

RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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## RMIT PlaceLab Initiative

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# RMIT PlaceLab is an urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

## Voice, Vibe, & Vision Research Project

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### Long Story Short

RMIT PlaceLab's **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** Research Project was an exploration of what gives Brunswick its unique character amid ongoing transformative infrastructure change.

### What We Explored

Focusing on the Brunswick Design District (BDD), **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** gathered local perspectives on the sounds, images, words, stories, and imaginings that make Brunswick, Brunswick.

The Project engaged with community members, RMIT students, and local stakeholders through a range of research activities, including a Community Survey, Walking Interviews, Photographer Trails, a Collage Workshop, and finally, a **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** Exhibition.

Community insights and materials collected were consolidated into: the 'Our Brunswick, My Brunswick' Community Book; the digital data visualisations, which can be accessed via the RMIT PlaceLab website ([www.placelab.rmit.edu.au](http://www.placelab.rmit.edu.au)); and this Summary Report. These are rich and practical research outputs that enable and encourage conversations about Brunswick now and into the future.



Figure 1. Sydney Road in Brunswick. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

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Our motivation to do this research was to provide the Brunswick community with some knowledge that might be of use as they confront transformative changes: many associated with major infrastructure projects, the climate emergency, and urban gentrification. Academic research tells us that – given the social, economic, and environmental consequences of urban changes – the participation of communities in transparent and rigorous processes of community engagement is a critical determinant in achieving outcomes that are not just economically successful, but also socially- and environmentally- just (Kahn et al. 2021; Park, Kim, Kim and Kim 2017; Yang et al. 2018). However, it is equally recognised that the implementation of effective processes and practices around community engagement remains a problematic fault-line.

Deverka et al. (2012:5) define engagement as:

“ **An iterative process of actively soliciting the knowledge, experience, judgment and values of individuals selected to represent a broad range of direct interest in a particular issue, for the dual purposes of: creating a shared understanding; making relevant, transparent and effective decisions.**



Figure 2. Brunswick Upfield Cycle Path. Image: Michelle Williams.

We were also motivated by the prospect of the planned Level Crossing Removal Project (LXRP) in Brunswick, and so undertook a review of the Coburg Skyrail Project. This involved an examination of grey literature and public social media pages to gather local resident perceptions of the successes and failures associated with this project. This process generated some lessons learnt, exposing a collection of concerns transferable to the Brunswick LXRP.

- a. Design of pedestrian paths (e.g., safety/access/size)
- b. Design of cycle paths
- c. Ecological considerations (e.g., greening, water drainage, birdlife, native animals)
- d. Design of outdoor recreational/leisure spaces/community infrastructure
- e. Relationship between bikes/cars/pedestrians (e.g., movement, parking, signage, priorities)
- f. Incorporation of heritage features
- g. Train station design (e.g., shade/access)
- h. Accessibility for all
- i. Indigenous heritage
- j. Design aesthetic
- k. Creative spaces and infrastructure

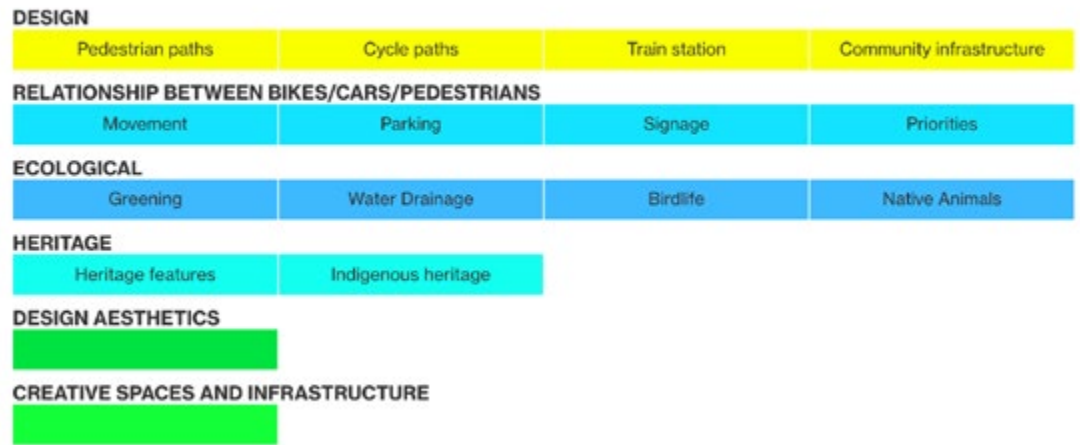


Figure 3. Diagram showcasing a collection of concerns/ considerations for the Brunswick LXP.

The review also exposed the need for a shared understanding of what is meant by “Brunswick’s Unique Character”, and how this translates into knowledge that might enable the community and other stakeholders to act for successful outcomes in projects of change. We hoped that helping to build a deeper understanding of Brunswick’s unique urban character might prove a useful mechanism to protect, preserve, or enable things that are essential to the fabric of the area.

**“ When talking about space-making practices, architects and urban planners are usually thinking about participatory planning and collaborative processes, often overlooking the ways in which the communities themselves can become their own agents of change. As the people pose an intimate knowledge of not only their environment, but also of social and cultural norms, the needs of their communities and latent opportunities within their surroundings, they are often the ones initiating actions, supporting their peers and contributing positively to their locality.**

– Maria-Cristina Florian, 28 August 2023. <sup>1</sup>

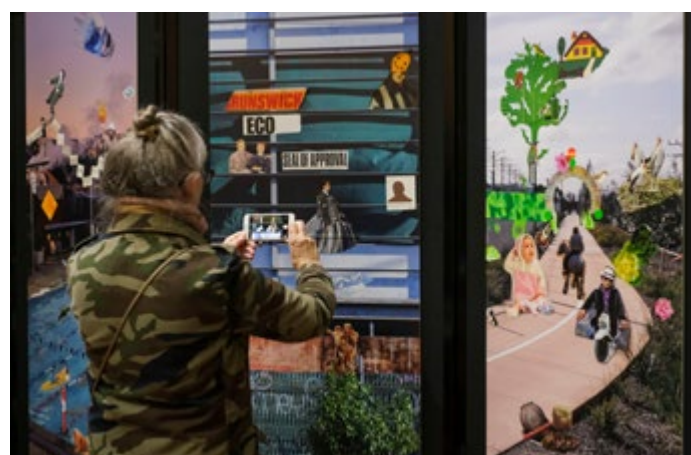


Figure 4. RMIT PlaceLab ‘Collage Brunswick’ community workshop. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.

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**Projects that adopt local culture during their process tend to be highly successful and recognised by the community...**

– Victor Delaqua

Translated by Diogo Simões,  
Published on July 28, 2023. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [www.archdaily.com/1006015/radical-ritualsstudio-forty-five-degrees-searches-for-local-space-making-practices-across-europe](http://www.archdaily.com/1006015/radical-ritualsstudio-forty-five-degrees-searches-for-local-space-making-practices-across-europe)

<sup>2</sup> [www.archdaily.com/1004081/contemporary-architecture-the-importance-of-local-culture-in-practice](http://www.archdaily.com/1004081/contemporary-architecture-the-importance-of-local-culture-in-practice)

Our research with the Brunswick community occurred over three months: July, August, and September 2023. We adopted a mixed methods approach, using an online survey, face-to-face walking interviews, photographer trails and a creative collaborative workshop. This reflects evidence that most research methods, used in isolation, have limitations that impede or restrict inclusive participation (Kingston, Carver, Evans and Turton 2000).

### 3.1 Research Methods

#### 3.1.1 Online Community Survey

The online community survey was completed by 237 people. While not limited to Brunswick residents, the survey reached 151 people who live in Brunswick, and 38 who have previously lived or worked in Brunswick. The survey was principally promoted via Instagram, which means that most respondents fell within the age group of 18-29 years. In line with common trends within qualitative research, 146 of respondents identified as female, 48 identified as male, with 11 identifying as gender diverse, and 32 preferring not to say.

#### 3.1.2 Walking Interviews

Eight walking interviews were undertaken with community members or representatives within the area of Brunswick bounded by Sydney Road and the Upfield Rail Line. We chose to adopt this participant-led, participatory approach as it is a qualitative research method that is well-aligned to research seeking to understanding a person's attitudes, knowledge and beliefs about a particular area and their attachment to the area (Clark and Emmel 2010). It is also appropriate for research aiming to explore a person's connection between self and place within the social environment of their neighbourhood. As Penelope Kinney (2017:4) writes:



Figure 5. 'What makes Brunswick, Brunswick' Online Community Survey Poster.

“ Talking becomes easier when walking. The act of walking allows participants to recall memories and/or experiences they may not have in a sedentary face to face interview.



Figure 6. The walking interview as a research method. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.



Figure 7. Walking Interview with Haikal Raji. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

### 3.1.3 Community Collage Workshop

PlaceLab's 'Collage Brunswick' Community Collage Workshop was delivered in collaboration with community partner, Max Malone from That Paper Joint.



Figure 8. Attendees gathered at the end of the 'Brunswick Collage' Workshop. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.



Figure 9. 'Collage Brunswick' workshop title done by That Paper Joint.

This workshop aimed at fostering community engagement and encouraging individuals to envision what Brunswick means to them on a personal and collective level, using creative and open-ended mediums. The workshop featured two main activities: the first involved crafting individual postcard-sized collages, allowing participants to express their own interpretations of "My Brunswick." The second activity centred around a large collaborative collage mural, where participants came together to collectively shape "Our Brunswick" while also sharing their aspirations and future vision for the community. This event served as a creative and inclusive platform for residents to explore and express their connections to Brunswick.

### 3.1.4 Photographer Trails

We also commissioned eight photographers (four professional, four RMIT photography students) to undertake photographer trails to gather images. This also focused on the area of Brunswick bounded by Sydney Road and the Upfield Rail Line.



Figure 10. Photography by Camille Perry.



Figure 11. Photography by Laura May Grogan.



## 3.2 Research Data Analysis: Two Approaches

For the data analysis, we used two approaches tailored to meet the interests and needs of the different audiences for the project outputs.

### 3.2.1 First Approach

To create the outputs for the community and other local stakeholders, we prioritised the need to privilege and respect the diversity of opinions across Brunswick. As a result, we used a very light touch in the analysis of data, choosing to preserve, as much as possible, the integrity and meaning of the information shared throughout the research activities. This led to the following outputs:

#### **Output 1: A Series of 'What Makes Brunswick, Brunswick?' Data Visualisations**

From the rich insights and data gathered through the 'What makes Brunswick, Brunswick?' Online Survey completed by 237 participants, we used 'Flourish', a data visualisation software which enables us to present our project's data with accuracy, transparency, and user-friendly interactive interface.

These charts and graphs generated by Flourish has allowed us to showcase the accurate number of responses, and ensured that the community members' input is accurately portrayed. The interactive features embedded in the software enhance accessibility, making it easy for people to view and explore the survey responses in an intuitive way. With qualitative data gathered, we find Flourish features enable the display of all community responses, preserving the richness and authenticity of each input.

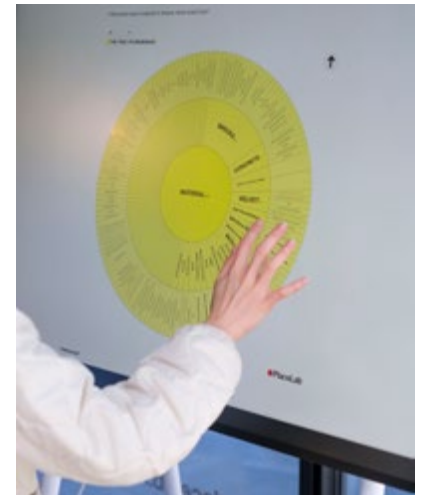


Figure 12. Interacting with the 'Feels of Brunswick' Data Visualisation. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.

#### **Output 2: 'My Brunswick, Our Brunswick' Community Book**

The compilation of this book was crafted with the purpose of synthesising a mosaic of diverse narratives that emerged throughout the research process. It serves as a compilation of diverse perspectives, sentiments, and insights that explore the collective identity of Brunswick as a community, with a particular emphasis on its unique approach to maintaining balance. Divided into three distinct sections, the book traces the multifaceted voices (Voice), atmospheres (Vibe), and aspirations (Vision) of the engaged community. Interspersed with unique quirks and character, the book mirrors the community's own distinctive personality, capturing a snapshot of the suburb's vibrant and multifaceted identity/spirit.



Figure 13. 'My Brunswick, Our Brunswick' Community Book. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

### 3.2.2 Second Approach

To create this summary report and findings for stakeholders and funders, we analysed the data gathered using the following questions:

1. **What does the data tell us about the ways in which people think about change and inclusion in Brunswick?**
2. **What does the data tell us about the relationship between the urban environment (including built form) and human activity in Brunswick?**

### 3.3 Community and Student Engagement

#### 3.3.1 Working with Students

##### Industrial Design Studio: 'Exploring Brunswick Atmospheres: Past, Present, Future'

As part of our 'Voice, Vibe & Vision' Research Project, we collaborated with Dr. Jordan Lacey and the Industrial design students from RMIT's School of Design through a 12-week studio that explored Brunswick's atmospheres. Co-teaching the studio, Brunswick local Tim Denshire-Key, brought the students closer to the suburb by showing them the working lives of art and design practitioners in the area. The key finding that emerged from these study tours is the presence of nondescript spaces rich in "hidden" cultural industries and activities, which according to Lacey, are part of what generates Brunswick's unique atmosphere. In other words, Brunswick atmosphere is comprised of non-showy characteristics, and the rich interior cultural life of the community living there.

Twisting on the traditional notion of industrial design, the students were led to think outside of the commercial, user-centred purpose of product design, and instead, concentrate on the environment that houses the object they create. In this case, they were generating prototypes and design outputs from the Brunswick neighbourhood's perspectives.

From detailing the relationships with the creatives that they had visited, to making a high-quality, refined prototype that aligned their relationships to a specific environment in Brunswick, the students contributed to uncovering Brunswick "vibe," or atmospheres, as well as gaining invaluable experience as emerging industrial design practitioners.



Figure 14. Jordan Lacey and his students at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

##### Display of Students' Works

In October 2023, the final works of the students' Industrial Design Studio were exhibited at the PlaceLab Brunswick Studio. The exhibition offered the local community fresh perspectives of Brunswick through the lens of industrial design students' practice and their atmospheric installation artworks.

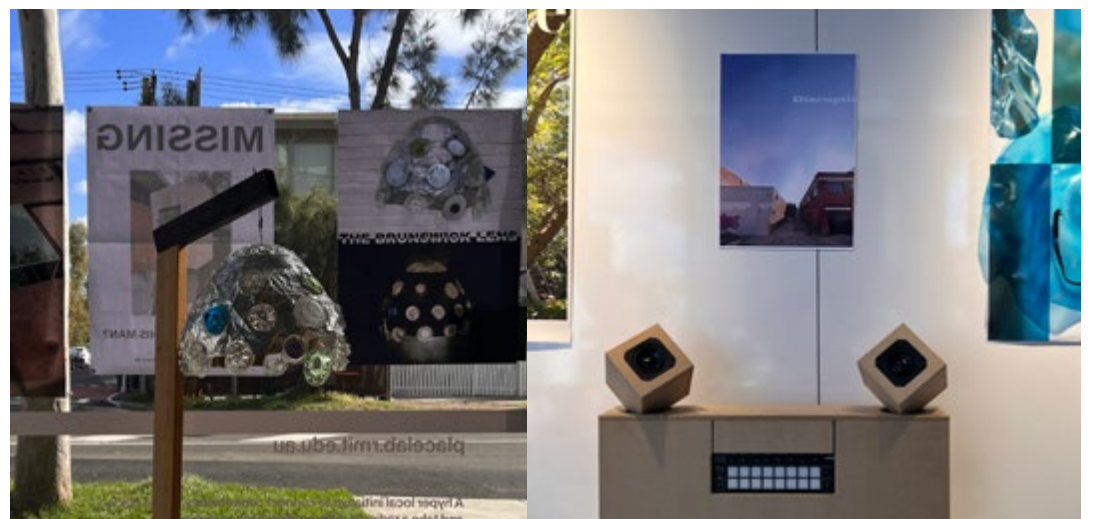


Figure 15. A few of the Industrial Design Students' works in the exhibition at RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

### 3.3.2 Exhibition



Figure 16. Community Collages exhibited at RMIT Placelab Brunswick Exhibition. Image: RMIT Placelab.

As part of RMIT PlaceLab's Cycle 02 Research Projects wrap up, from 6th to 20th December 2023 we presented the RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick Exhibition showcasing outputs for our two Brunswick-based Research Projects – **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** and **'Wear & Care'**.

Visitors from across community, local council, industry, local media and RMIT discovered our journey seeking to capture the essence of Brunswick. The **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** Exhibition comprised of:

- Printed information panels about the Research Project
- Large-scale community collages on top of Brunswick photography trails' images from the 'Collage Brunswick' workshop
- A digital screen with the Flourish interactive data visualisations from our Community Research Survey; and
- The key output – our printed book 'My Brunswick, Our Brunswick' for community members to take home.



Figure 17. Printed information panels about the Research Project at RMIT Placelab Brunswick Exhibition. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.

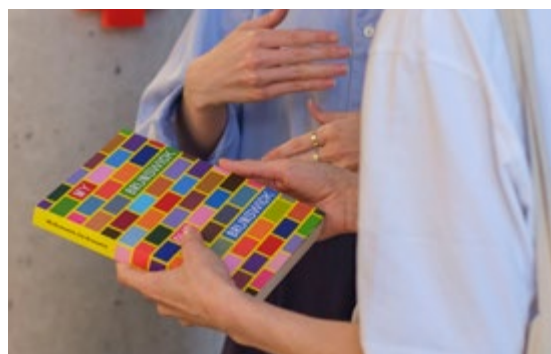


Figure 18. Community members holding a copy of 'My Brunswick, Our Brunswick' book. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.



Figure 19. Interactive data visualisations at RMIT Placelab Brunswick Exhibition. Image: Suzanne Phoenix.

“ Brunswick is the mash of sloppy gentrification. There’s bars and hip apartments but always spilt rubbish bins and rotting food. There are fun new places opening and store fronts that seem cursed to stay empty. There’ll be a broadsheet write up next to a footpath crusted in pigeon shit. This mix is the Brunswick vibe. Creative, fun, friendly and messy.

– Survey Respondent

By exploring different ways of making meaning from the data analysis, we have drawn a set of findings about the various ways the people who took part in this research understand (1) change, (2) inclusion, and (3) the relationship between built form and human activity.

#### 4.1 Change

“ Brunswick is not inherently a romantic place or an easy place to live in or even visit. Perhaps because of this, people invest in small joys. They take time to make and indulge and celebrate and colour in the grey. Brunswick is an area where heritage had been littered with so much ugly architecture, opportunistic “development”, and concrete. Sydney Road is such a nightmare to travel... by flowers are planted in the cracks. People have worked together to accommodate each other and share small joys where they can.

– Survey Respondent

**Brunswick is constantly in flux.** Nothing is permanent. Instead, permanence is viewed as a flawed idea. And so, people do not imagine permanence as a goal, nor do they hope for an absence of change. They do not mourn change. They note change, but they accept it as a phenomenon that makes it possible for Brunswick to respond and adapt, meeting the needs of the people, institutions, enterprises, and cultures that comprise its community.

**Brunswick is a living ecology.** It is designed to change, to adapt, to evolve. Change is an organic process in vibrant, dynamic, healthy, evolving cultures. But this is not to say that change always creates conditions in which to thrive.

**Care is needed to maintain balance in Brunswick’s loved and ever-changing social fabric.**



Figure 20. Diagram showcasing a collection of keywords related to Change in Brunswick.



Figure 21. A collage done by a community member in PlaceLab's 'Collage Brunswick' workshop.

## 4.2 Inclusion

“ I used to get my hair cut here. It was an Iranian guy, an Iraqi guy, and a Lebanese guy and they all worked side by side.

– Jeremy McLeod

The presence of individual and collective **differences** – whether these are opinions, views, values, perspectives, standpoints, histories, cultures, or political views – is embraced as **essential to the character of Brunswick**. Differences are not tools of conflict. They are not tools of inclusion or exclusion. Rather, differences are tools used to **cooperatively craft spaces** for dialogue aimed at collectively crafting a space, a better society.

“ Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.

– Dei (2016:23)



Figure 22. 'Brunswick Barber Shop' on Sydney Road. Image: RMIT Placelab.



Figure 23. Diagram showcasing a collection of keywords related to Inclusion in Brunswick.

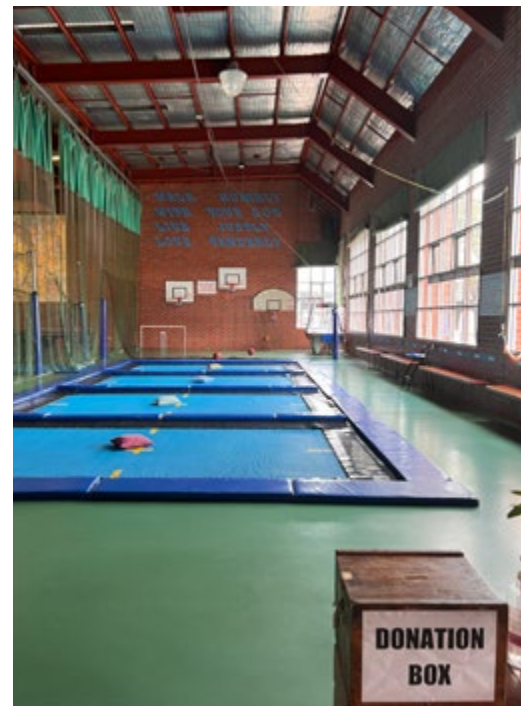


Figure 24. Don Bosco Youth Centre on Sydney Road. Image: RMIT Placelab.

### 4.3 Relationship Between the Urban Environment and Human Activity.

The urban environment of Brunswick welcomes, hosts, and makes possible the myriad of ways in which people gather, intersect, and interact. These everyday places include open public sites, local landmarks, spaces (commercial, creative and community), and civic and community infrastructure. These are cherished everyday places within the urban environment of Brunswick that broadly share some common principles that create value and meaning. These places allow for:

- (1) spontaneity, improvisation, creativity, and playfulness;
- (2) different and changing modes of interaction between people;
- (3) indeterminacy and unpredictability of use; and
- (4) and, perhaps most importantly, flexible adaptations over time.



These four principles – which we offer as prompts or provocations for more research, conversation, discussion, debate, and critique – might be viewed as the critical characteristics of Brunswick’s urban environment that enable the activities and interactions between people, community, and social activity that bring the areas character and community together.

Figure 25. The ‘Sites of Brunswick’ Data Visualisation from the community online survey ‘What makes Brunswick, Brunswick?’ completed by 237 people.

However, more important perhaps, than these four principles, is the fact that these everyday places are valued because they are freely accessible, public spots, where people can access shared, participatory experiences. Whether this be the beloved Upfield Bike Path, the boulder wall outside Dangerfield on Sydney Road, the Don Bosco Youth Centre, or the benches outside the Mechanics’ Institute. In this way, the working-class heritage of the area, together with the legacy of the shifting socio-economic demographics, shapes the area despite gentrification.

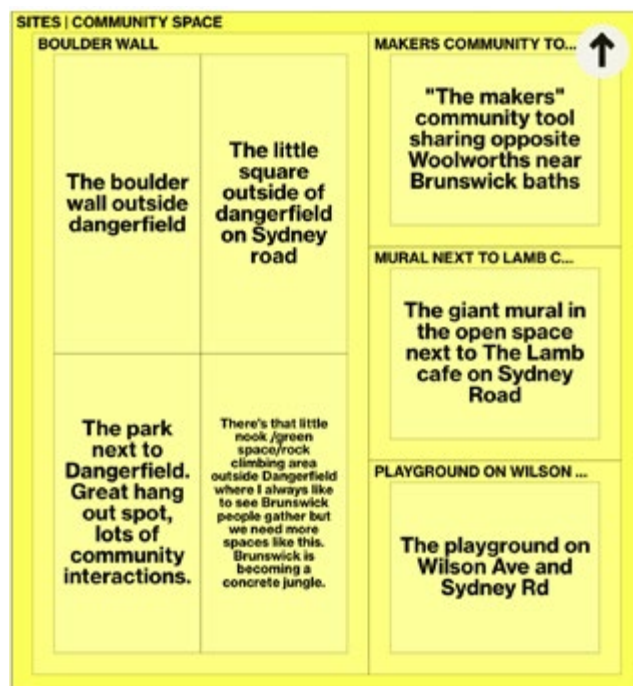


Figure 26. The ‘Sites of Brunswick’ Data Visualisation from the community online survey ‘What makes Brunswick, Brunswick?’ completed by 237 people.

Below are some reflections and considerations that were collated from the research and activities undertaken as part of the **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** Project.

### 5.1 Enhancing What People Love About Brunswick

- Avoid too much prescription around how people will negotiate the urban environment. Allow for people to find their own 'sneaky routes', their own desire lines, or secret routes.
- Continue to strengthen connections to existing and emerging public services and infrastructure ('civic services').
- Continue to facilitate more greening opportunities.
- Prioritise safe and equitable movement regardless of mode of transport (car, bike, foot, wheelchair etc.) in planning.
- Embed stories of Brunswick's past, with space allowed for people to write the stories of today and the future.
- Retain what is valued by the community, but also allow for these values to change and shift over time.
- Recognise and care for the precarious balance that is required to maintain the essential fabric of Brunswick's community.
- Deliberately design for population growth & demographic change.



Figure 27. Wilson Avenue Bouldering Wall in Brunswick. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

### 5.2 Considerations for Design

- **Leave Public Spaces Unfinished** Designing infrastructure that can encourage unexpected uses of public space, and foster spontaneity and improvisation.
- **Design for Interaction** Intentionally design to encourage different forms of interaction – even conflict – in public.
- **Design for Indeterminacy & Unpredictability** Create spaces that have various functional capabilities, rather than assigned functions to create potential to be turned to diverse uses or multiple possibilities not necessarily imagined or envisaged by the planners. Allow for under-designed spaces to create opportunity for community to helping spaces/infrastructure to evolve.
- **Design for Flexibility** Create in-built flexibility to allow for adaptation and change, and allow for spaces to be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled in different ways.

### 5.3 Afterword

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From a seemingly simple objective: *to understand what makes Brunswick, Brunswick*, the **‘Voice, Vibe & Vision’ Research Project** has gathered rich, personal, and shared insights into both local space-making and cultural practices, as well as stories (past, present and emerging) that exist within the Brunswick community. The outcomes of the project have made tangible the somewhat elusive and intangible notion of ‘Brunswick’s unique urban character’. In the face of transformative urban developments, this contribution might offer the community a useful mechanism to protect, preserve, and enable things essential to the fabric of the area. What emerges from the study highlights key approaches for urban design and planning, ensuring the suburb’s heritage is preserved and allowed to evolve with the community living in Merri-bek.

RMIT PlaceLab proves what is possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs research. Together, we’ve tackled real-world, urban challenges and sought innovations that look to improve liveability, community resilience and connection.



Figure 28. Houses with the new developments in Brunswick. Image: RMIT PlaceLab.

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## Project Acknowledgements

The **'Voice, Vibe & Vision'** Research Project was part of RMIT PlaceLab, an RMIT Initiative supported through the Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund (VHESIF).

### 'Voice, Vibe & Vision' Research Project Team

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### RMIT Academic Collaborators

Dr. Louise Godwin, Georgina Nolan, Dr. Jordan Lacey, Tim Denshire-Key

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- **Photographer Trail Contributors:** Camille Perry, Kim Canales-Ascui, Laura May Grogan, Matthew Parsons, Nicholas Orloff, Rowan Green, Stacey Wang, Theresa Harrison
- **'Voice, Vibe & Vision' Research Survey Participants:** The 237 people who contributed to our Community Survey 'What makes Brunswick, Brunswick?'
- **'Collage Brunswick' Workshop Facilitators:** Max Malone & Zoe Crook from 'That paper joint'
- **'Collage Brunswick' Workshop Participants:** The creative collage attendees who contributed to our 'Voice, Vibe & Vision' 'Collage Brunswick' Community Workshop
- **RMIT Design Students:** The students from RMIT Bachelor of Industrial Design Studio - 'Exploring Brunswick Atmospheres: Past, Present, Future'.
- **'Voice, Vibe & Vision' Exhibition Visitors, as part of the RMIT PlaceLab Brunswick Exhibition:** Over 100 community members, industry representatives, Merri-bek City Council members and RMIT staff and students who visited the Exhibition
- **Partners:** Merri-bek City Council, Brunswick Design District (BDD), Troy Stuchbree from Sydney Road Traders Association.

## Ethics

This research project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 25586.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

## Conflicts of Interest

There are no declared conflicts of interest associated with this research project.

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**We hope this report sparks more important conversations.**

**We'd love to hear your thoughts via:  
hello.placelab@rmit.edu.au**

**Find out more about the RMIT PlaceLab Initiative  
and our research activity, go to:**

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