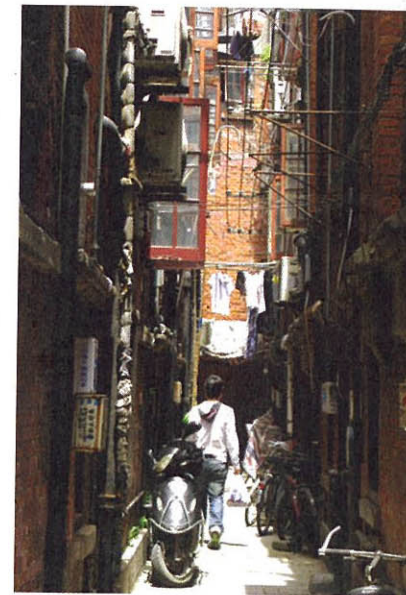




Inner city density in China's laneways (this page). The void between two buildings becomes a beautiful garden, Melbourne (opposite page).



True Grit

Text: Nicole Azzopardi

From the laneways of Paris' Latin Quarter and its epicurean hideaways to the low-lit Mao-inspired drinking dens of Beijing's Hutong district, the urban reality of narrow living has become a destination all of its own.

It's Friday night as our cab winds its way out of the clogged highways of modern Beijing and into the ancient maze of alleyways in the Dongcheng district. Red lanterns swing in the wind, colouring the monochrome labyrinths, illuminating miniature keyhole-shaped doorways of homes hidden in the dark.

Further down on Nan Luo Gu, the Sand Glass bar pulses with moody world music. Pouty Chinese women wearing hybrid outfits inspired by Wong Kar-wai and Hello Kitty add a futuristic look to old Beijing.

In Paris, a man stops in a cobbled stone square to scrape the signature of a French poodle off the sole of his shoe while another pauses to watch a Flamenco dance class take place in the 15th century building above. Late night Jewish bakeries beckon and good-looking girls sit outside at tiny tables drinking Pernod and smoking packets

of Galoise.

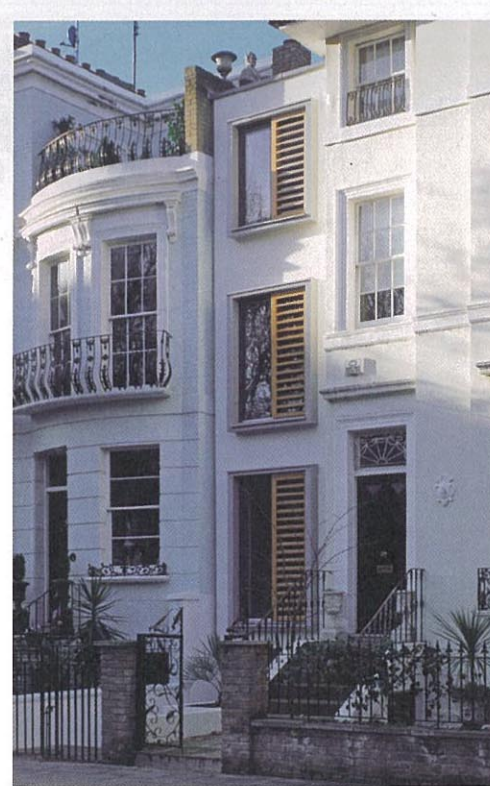
On the other side of the world a waiter at Melbourne institution, Degraives, is serving his first early morning short black and people are snaking their way towards the city centre. The main arterials will get them there, but why would they choose those as a thoroughfare when they can step through a microcosm of Melbourne cultural life? It's called diversity, both spatially and culturally, and with that comes a world of possibility. Laneway culture and the reclamation of disused spaces has taken on a global cult following.

Designers are observing the trend of working with found availability and seeing the grimy reality of a city's true nature as an opportunity to make it shine. But is it planning or people that help it come about? Best selling American author and professor of regional economic

development, Richard Florida, says it's the creative set that will help to make a city work. In his acclaimed book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida's research reveals that places with a high concentration of gay people, artists, musicians and designers tend to have higher rates of innovation and economic growth. "I'm not suggesting that gays and bohemians literally cause regions to grow," he states. "Rather, their presence in large numbers is an indicator of an underlying culture that's open-minded and diverse – and thus conducive to creativity."

According to Florida, the most successful regions welcome all sorts of people. They offer a range of living choices, from nice suburbs with single family housing to hip urban districts for the unattached. So, how is it achieved?

For the moment, the nation's eyes →



A driveway becomes a home (left). Squeezed between two London terraces, this 2.5 metre wide house wastes no space (middle). Corner House by Mackenzie Pronk Architects, Sydney (right). Degraives St, one of Melbourne's many narrow, vibrant spaces (opposite page).

are on Melbourne. The southern city's lanes are being used as a blueprint to inform the urban design of inner city precincts. Encouraging people to live in town and commissioning a swathe of public art has transformed its centre into just the kind of city Florida is talking about.

Canberra-based public art co-ordinator Pamille Berg says designers and artists were looking to Melbourne as an example of how to build on a city's existing culture and using its vernacular to make it work. "Art is the way for Canberra to move from its history of political accident, towards a city of true human necessity," she says.

For Berg, Melbourne town planners have allowed artists to perform their true role in society – making work that critiques and comments on their environment. "Artists in Melbourne are told: Here's a space we want to make interesting for a particular season of the year. What can you do to make it magical, or scary, or in-your-face to bring people out and make them feel they can be in the city all year round?" In this way, narrow spaces become the perfect artistic backdrop

– as well as an essential antidote to a feeling of sterility cities like Canberra are often accused of.

For Neil Mackenzie of Mackenzie Pronk Architects, the potential of liberating an architecture from extremely narrow sites is a common challenge in his practice's inner city work. Having built Corner House, a 150 square metre, two-bedroom house in the Sydney suburb of Newtown on a tiny 70 square metre block, Mackenzie believes there is much architectural potential to design in a way that supports the growth of a creative class. "The trend is finally to accept our own environment and to start working with it," he says. "That means not bulldozing and starting again but accepting what's there and finding clever solutions to make it work."

Mackenzie claims that projects like the Corner House prove that you can live comfortably without the McMansion that the market insists we all need. "The typical old quarter acre block is 1000 square metres, and while some developers are trying to be more judicious with land use, the bottom line is if you drop the more

traditional models you can get fourteen of these houses on a typical quarter acre block. None are selling suitable product or lots under 70 square metres. Truly sustainable development must look for any opportunity to increase density within existing suburbs, rather than continuing to create suburbs of bloated masses," he explains. "It's got to start with reducing the loss of productive land, limiting the sprawl, building in areas well served by public transport, minimising the loss of habitat on the perimeters of the city, and importantly building with quality for the long term," Mackenzie goes on.

He concludes, "Many of us have a deep appreciation of the scale and character of medieval towns. Towns like these have 500-year-old streetscapes with facades three or four metres away from each other. Regulations say we can't do that any more, yet they are such amazing spaces. They are in our DNA as the right way to live. They remind us of the buzz of the marketplace, the Kasbah, the town square – all places where we as humanity are all a little closer together."

