

# DISCOURSE

## 05 THE AGENCY OF CITIES

Friday 11 September 6:15pm

Swanston Academic Building (SAB)

Building 80, Level 4, Room 11

**Convenors**  
Gretchen Wilkins & Paul Minifie

**Moderator**  
Gretchen Wilkins

**Panel**  
Mark Jacques  
Peter Brew  
Marika Neustupny  
Paul Minifie

The addition or subtraction of a single building resonates beyond its own site or circumstance. Is urbanism a function of the city, or the other way around?  
Gretchen Wilkins (2015)

Cities, all their interconnected structures and systems, are a physical precipitate that crystallises out of the myriad decisions its residents make in arranging and rearranging their lives. At the same time, we are also made by our city, which presents to us the menu of options from which we constantly choose when deciding just what it is we might do next.  
Paul Minifie (2015)

Does the city have an agency at all? The city only exists as long as the advantages of proximity are greater than its disadvantages. That is to say, the city is an after effect of the agents of adjacency and the communal rather than having agency over them.  
Mark Jacques (2015)

We need to talk about cities.  
We need to talk about what we like about cities, the spaces the sense of discovery, the wealth of things. We need to describe the grasslands and night skies and the sound of bats. Oscar Wilde said of J.M.W Turner's paintings that nobody noticed the smog until Turner painted it.  
Peter Brew (2015)

Cities are a kind of sub-consciousness; always there, affecting mood and culture, creating answers as required. Water is one lens through which the workings of the city can be brought back to the scale of buildings and bodies.  
Marika Neustupny (2015)

**As Architects and Urban Designers, in the first instance interested in the particular qualities of constructed environment, the City is simultaneously a useful and elusive object. The agency of cities is inseparable from the agency of its systems and citizens, isn't it? Does the city itself have agency to effect or direct change as a whole greater than the sum of its parts, or is agency distributed throughout its constituent parts, summoned and leveraged by socio-political agents? In order to locate the agency of cities we first need to establish what sort of useful and elusive object a City is.**

**Is a City an historical and material artefact providing a ground to be interpreted for constraints and justifications of new interventions?**

**Is a City a spatial manifestation of our political economy – a sanctimonious assertion of 'good' public space vs. unbridled and value-free play of private market forces?**

**Is a City a meaningful local arrangement of what we see – a set of built pieces, fabrics and mise en scene, or a set of spatial systems providing opportunities for interaction, transaction and exchange?**

**Is a City a result of its historicity – an accumulation of once useful, now sclerotic and merely habituated structures, or a place to fully support the lives we live and strive towards?**

**This session will posit a series of approaches toward apprehending the city, urbanism, and urban agency. Where is the agency of cities, and of design in cities? Who decides?**

RMIT Architecture & Urban Design values ideas-led ventures design experimentation and exploration. To be venturous is to be brave and take risks. At RMIT students are asked to articulate the positions contained in their projects, to be critical and assert their interests and future directions. It is important that architectural projects and ideas are situated within wider discussions in the discipline and that propositions are formed that suggest how a contribution can be made to disciplinary, as well as to wider contexts and ideas in the world.

The Architecture & Urban Design Discourse Series will use five themes as catalysts to initiate conversations amongst design studio leaders and reveal their positions, attitudes and propositions. There is a long standing tradition of discourse at RMIT and this series aspires to reveal our collective and diverse concerns and facilitate speculation on how these might contribute to advancing the discipline and the wider terrains that they engage in. If we drill down and look behind the statements made at design studio presentations, what do they explicitly refer to, what do they suggest and what do they lead to?  
Vivian Mitsogianni - Deputy Dean Architecture & Urban Design