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Article

Visually Impaired Persons and Social Encounters in Central Melbourne

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Abstract
Urban spaces are areas where routes, activities, and people, including visually impaired persons (VIPs), intersect. Most urban research on VIPs focuses on wayfinding. However, the experience of urban spaces is not limited to utilitarian functions and also includes people's lived experiences and random social encounters. To understand how a broader range of activities, experiences, and encounters may be better enabled, VIPs have participated in multi-method research including interviews, word games, walking interviews, and diary recordings in central Melbourne. Results not only indicate a broad range of unmediated conflicts between VIPs' mobility needs and key aspects of intense street life but also reveal opportunities that are potentially hidden in random encounters in public spaces.

Keywords
Melbourne; social encounter; urban space; visually impaired persons

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Improvisation, Conviviality, and Conflict in Everyday Encounters in Public Space" edited by Mervyn Horgan (University of Guelph) and Saara Liinamaa (University of Guelph).

1. Introduction

Urban is derived from the Latin *urbanus*, which means "courteous," and being urban or urbane is about respecting "differences" between people (Dovey, 2016, p. 9). These differences can be seen in the different abilities that people may have; for instance, visually impaired persons (VIPs) can interpret the environment differently from people with vision. As the literature review shows, many studies have focused on wayfinding, access, and technologies to aid VIPs with navigation. However, urban space is a social space, and social encounters are a substantial part of experiencing urban space. Encounters between people can occur in many ways, from a glare to a conversation (Carr et al., 1992). However, how do social encounters occur when someone does not possess usable vision? Vision is considered the main source of acquiring information in the environment. VIPs, due to lack of vision, may not be able to acquire information on their environment as readily as people with vision do. Perceiving the socio-spatial elements of urban spaces can be demanding and social interactions can be reduced or shaped differently due to a lack of non-verbal connection between VIPs and non-VIPs.

This research explored the social interaction of VIPs in urban spaces in central Melbourne to answer the question: How do VIPs experience and perceive the socio-spatial aspects of urban spaces? For these purposes, VIPs participated in interviews, word games, walking interviews, and diary recordings—each research method having its distinct strength. The findings reveal a broad range of interactions between VIPs and people with vision in urban spaces, but also the presence of unmediated conflicts. The research also identifies some factors through which public space can either hinder or create opportunities for VIP participation. This article summarises the literature on social encounters in public spaces and more specifically on VIPs in urban spaces. The methodology is then explained and the findings are presented. In conclusion, the experiences of VIPs in public spaces are discussed with a focus on the nature of their social encounters.

2. Social Encounters in Public Spaces

Urban space creates the opportunity for people of different cultures, ages, and genders to intermingle (Madanipour, 1996). It is where we are co-present with strangers; as Sennett (1977, p. 39) wrote, a city is "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet." There are different forms of communication in urban spaces and the dominant form in dense urban environments is non-verbal (Rapoport, 1990). The role of urban space is beyond the physical presence of individuals. It is a place where people gather for various reasons including gossiping, exchanging ideas, and marketing, and this kind of social life is essential to the city (Whyte, 1988). One pattern of intense social encounters in public spaces is "triangulation," which is defined by Whyte (1980) as direct communication between strangers enabled by a third factor such as an object or an event; for example, a performance that happens in an urban space that attracts audiences and leads to social interactions.

A broad theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between built form and social behaviour is provided by Gibson's (1977) affordance theory, which highlights capacities that emerge from the design of public space and the people using it. Affordance is strongly related to the ability of humans and their senses including the visual, olfactory, and auditory senses. It should be measured "relative to the animal," considering their "posture" and "behaviour" as "different layouts afford different behaviour for different animals and different mechanical encounters" (Gibson, 1977, p. 120). Osmond (1957) refers to public space design that enables social encounters as "socio-petal" and public space design that hinders social encounters as "socio-fugal." Socio-petal public space is where people tend to come together and socio-fugal space is where they tend to avoid one another. Horgan et al. (2020, p. 147) have also introduced and defined "affordances of sociability…broadly as any elements of a social setting that facilitate positive interactions between strangers."

A pre-condition to social encounters in public spaces is walkable access. Broadly, walkability refers to the capacity of the built environment to enable walking, which then promotes random face-to-face encounters between strangers. Walkability is a complex concept with implications for health, productivity, and social equity. Research in various fields, including health and transport, have converged to identify three urban form factors that are central to walkability: density (leading to the concentration of people within a walkable distance), functional mix (creating more destinations), and access (enabling pedestrian flow; see Dovey & Pafka, 2020).

Successful urban spaces enable a diversity of activities. Gehl (1987) classifies these activities into three categories. The first is necessary activities, which happen by walking to different destinations despite strong deterrents. Walking to work, school, or grocery shopping are among these types of activities, which occur even in poorly designed and hostile environments. The second category is optional activities that occur when there is time and desire to be in the place. These activities are related to the quality of the environment including physical aspects. Third are those activities that occur when people engage in optional social activities. There may be considerable overlap between these categories, such as when random encounters occur while walking from home to work, or when an optional walk leads to a social activity.

3. Visually Impaired Persons in Urban Spaces

Vision impairment or vision loss is a sensory disability that cannot be corrected with lenses or glasses. Globally, according to the World Health Organization (2017), around 253 million people live with visual impairment, of which 36 million are blind. Vision Australia (2017) estimates there are currently 384,000 blind and visually impaired people in Australia, and this number is expected to increase. Vision impairment can have various causes with a broad spectrum of symptoms ranging from the legally blind, who cannot see at 6 metres what a person with typical vision can see at 60 metres, to people with peripheral field loss, general field loss, and central field loss (Harkey et al., 2007).

Visually impaired people generally use navigation aids such as a white cane, guide dog, or navigation apps that accompany their body while negotiating the environment. The "stick," as Descartes named it, has been interpreted in different ways. He argued "that one might almost say that they see with their hands" (Descartes, 1637/1985, p. 153), referring to VIPs who use canes. Others describe the cane as an extension of the arm (cane as a sense of touch; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Characterising the cane as a tool for seeing—a sensory organ or extension of the body—indicates its importance to VIPs and cannot be discarded because it functions as part of the body.

In urban studies, wayfinding is one of the most extensively researched topics concerning VIPs (Folska, 2012; Golledge, 1993, 1999; Koutsoklenis & Papadopoulos, 2011a, 2011b, 2014; Passini & Proulx, 1988). Wayfinding is defined "as the process of determining and following a path or route between a point of origin and a destination, which is a purposeful, directed, and motivated activity" (Golledge, 1999, p. 6). A quantitative study on orientation by mobility professionals emphasised the importance of physical elements in VIPs' navigation of urban spaces. That study's questionnaire, which asked participants to rank 34 physical elements such as tactile ground indicators or audible signals, suggested their importance could be different for people with various vision statuses (Bredmose et al., 2023).

While Lynch's (1960) seminal work identified five elements that contribute to urban legibility—pathways, edges, nodes, landmarks, and districts—a focus on visual

aspects of urban space is a key limitation of these. In contrast, VIPs, including blind people, use other senses such as haptic, audio, motion, and flow to perceive and orient themselves in the environment (Jacobson, 1998). More recently, Folska (2012) expanded Lynch's theory by considering other senses that VIPs use to navigate. Folska's research into blind people's mental maps of designated urban spaces found that planners and urban designers should consider places that are unknown or unremarked by blind people. Other studies have focused on different aspects of the experience of urban space. One study in Singapore, which involved a mixed group of VIPs and non-VIPS, used interviews and participant observation to "illumine the intricate relationship between our non-visual senses and social sensibility" (Pow, 2000, p. 166). Another study in Reading and Leeds, England, which involved in-depth interviews with VIPs, highlighted that social definitions of "normality" have strongly influenced the self-image of visually impaired respondents. This study concluded that most participants were "highly self-conscious and self-critical about their appearance and behaviour in public" (Butler & Bowlby, 1997, p. 423).

Studies of technical devices such as smartphone apps, tactile maps, different types of canes, and beacon technologies for VIP navigation is another common and useful line of research, but has been critiqued for reducing the problems facing VIPs "to technical issues which can be solved by utilising technical solutions" (Imrie, 1996, p. 401). Such props can have mixed effects, such as white canes being linked to stigmatisation but also to increased security (Lid & Solvang, 2016). VIP experiences also vary broadly from those who are reluctant to use canes to those who enjoy using them. Findings from studies about guide dogs also vary, showing they can open up a conversation or hinder navigation when people interfere without an invitation (Worth, 2013).

4. Methodology

This research used Melbourne as a case study. Metropolitan Melbourne has nearly 5 million residents and sprawls over a vast area with a radius of over 50 km around the central city. The central city has a daytime population of over 1 million and has a high concentration of businesses, services, and visitor attractions. Key VIP services such as Women With Disabilities Victoria and Blind Citizens Australia are located in the central city. Multiple public transport modes including trains, trams, and buses link the metropolitan area to the central city. The city of Melbourne is a local government that includes the Melbourne Central Business District (CBD) and surrounding inner-urban suburbs. The city has been transformed since the mid-1980s into a mixed-use urban area with high levels of walking and social encounters (Dovey et al., 2018). Melbourne CBD has a distinct grid morphology of 200 x 100-metre blocks, cut through by narrow laneways and shopping arcades. The initial findings of this research indicated that VIPs visit central Melbourne mainly for work, appointments, and in some cases voluntary activities, and they typically use the train as a means of transportation to reach the CBD.

In seeking to advance understanding of VIPs' experiences, a qualitative multi-methods approach was chosen to foreground "meaning rather than frequencies" in the analysis (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 5). Each visually impaired participant was invited to take part in four activities based on their availability. The first activity was an interview conducted via phone or an online platform due to Covid-19 restrictions imposed in Melbourne in 2020–2021. The interview themes focused on the participant's experiences and perceptions of public spaces in central Melbourne to investigate physical environment issues and socio-spatial relations. The length of the interviews was approximately one hour each, and a semi-structured format was chosen to provide an opportunity for follow-up questions (Adams, 2015).

The second activity involved a words game that was adapted from research conducted by Dischinger (2000) to obtain information—in a playful way—about the meaning and value of socio-spatial features of urban spaces and the image of the city centre for VIPs. Eighty-four words including street names, laneways, squares, parks, arcades, people, and common street furniture were listed. The list did not follow a specific order in terms of topical clusters, but words were grouped based on urban space elements/subjects to assist each participant to focus on one element or subject at a time. This activity was approximately 90 minutes long and conversations with the participants were audio recorded. This was conducted after the interview because the participants had already been acquainted with the theme of the research alongside the provided initial information, and had already gained a deeper understanding of the context of the research.

The third activity was a walking interview. This provided opportunities for the researcher to observe participants in their environment. Walking interviews can give insights into a participant's lived experience that otherwise may not be reported, such as the sense of isolation or alienation (Butler & Derrett, 2014). It is a well-established method used to explore the relationship between a participant, the built environment, and other people (Evans & Jones, 2011). The route was planned to include a diversity of urban spaces with different activity levels and uses, such as a riverside promenade, urban square, laneways, arcades, parks, and streets. Participants in walking interviews were asked to walk as they usually do. The researcher was cautious not to distract the participants but warned them if there was a potential hazard, such as tripping or traffic. The researcher took note of her observations about the socio-spatial aspects of the VIP walk. Five people participated in this method. The conversations were recorded, and some elements were photographed. The duration of the interviews ranged between one and a half hours to two hours based on the speed of walking and foot traffic.

In the final activity, participants were invited to record their experiences of the city in a diary. This is an established method of collecting primary data from VIPs (Milligan, 2005; Papadopoulos & Scanlon, 2002). In this study, the diaries supplied valuable insights into the perceptions, feelings, and interactions of VIPs as they went about their daily lives in public spaces. General instruction was given to participants based on a socio-spatial and temporal approach, which focused data collection on people, routes, and speeds. All diaries were transcribed for thematic analysis. Generally, the participants preferred to record their diaries in quieter places—not while walking on the street—and one participant chose to record the diary by typing.

The participants were recruited through organisations that deal with disability and VIPs issues such as Blind Citizens Australia and Vision Australia. The participants were provided with plain language statements and participant consent forms and, overall, eight VIPs participated in this research. All participants lived outside of the CBD and commute to the city for work or to meet other basic needs. Table 1 lists the participants, including their vision status, mobility assistance, and participation in different research activities.

VIPs who consented to participate in the research did so under the condition of anonymity. Therefore, a VIP number is used when referring to individual participants in the research, and all primary source data collected were de-identified to safeguard their identity.

5. Findings

5.1. Intersecting Flows

Interviewing VIPs revealed that their primary reasons for being in the city is paid work, appointments—such as medical or accountant appointments—and, in some cases, voluntary work. Generally, they do not spend time in the city doing unplanned walks or visiting places without an important reason.

Additionally, for VIPs who work in the city, it is demanding to leave their workplace to go for a short walk due to wayfinding issues, tripping hazards, and time management. Negotiating public spaces is highly demanding for VIPs. For example, VIP-2 mentioned that it was difficult to enjoy the city because, although she did not physically tire from walking, concentrating for a long time made her feel mentally tired. Changes in the built environment or its use increase the challenges. Changing regulations that are not directly related to VIPs can create issues that impact their experience of the city. For instance, VIP-6 mentioned that after smoking became illegal in indoor settings in 2007, gathering outside for smoking at building entrances became an obstruction and a potential hazard for VIPs. In addition to this, in some cases, people tend to stop in the middle of a walkway to have a conversation, which can also become an obstruction to VIPs.

Some people might sit on the street rather than using a street bench, creating tripping hazards. Rough sleepers sitting on the ground could also be expected to be a tripping hazard for VIPs. That being said, results show that this wasn't a very strong concern, as VIPs reported that rough sleepers often notify them and sometimes engage in conversation, though VIP-6 mentioned that, from a broader perspective, the lack of housing for rough sleepers is problematic for both parties. Having no safe accommodation, living on a hard and cold surface, and the responsibility of negotiating around them for other pedestrians can be problematic for all. VIP-1 also mentioned that "sometimes I try to be aware of where they are likely to be….I do not want to hurt them."

Tripping is a risk when bicycle users, couriers, and people who deliver packages leave their vehicles on footpaths. For example, bikes left lying on the street contribute to a more complex and unpredictable streetscape. This is more problematic in narrow laneways with limited

Table 1. Summary of participants and their participation (M1–M4).

ID	Gender	Age	Visually impaired status	Visually impaired development age	Navigation aid	Method 1: Interview (ca. 60 min)	Method 2: Words game (ca. 90 min)	Method 3: Walking interview (ca. 120 min)	Method 4: Diary recording (ca. 30 min)
VIP-1	Female	50s	Severe	Since birth	Cane	✓	✓	×	×
VIP-2	Female	20s	Severe	Since birth	Cane	✓	✓	✓	×
VIP-3	Male	20s	Severe	Early age	Cane	✓	✓	✓	✓
VIP-4	Male	50s	Severe	Adult	Cane	✓	✓	×	×
VIP-5	Male	50s	Blind	Since birth	Guide dog/cane	✓	✓	×	×
VIP-6	Female	40s	Blind	Since birth	Cane	✓	×	×	×
VIP-7	Female	50s	Moderate	Since birth	Cane/none	✓	✓	✓	✓
VIP-8	Male	50s	Legally blind	Since birth	Cane	×	×	✓	✓

space for passing people. VIP-4 explained that he rarely uses his cane outside the CBD despite having a limited vision. However, he needs to use the cane in the city due to the flow of pedestrian traffic and unexpected items such as chairs and tables for dining.

Street music is another activity that can hinder effective navigation because buskers occupy streets with equipment that VIPs are not aware of. Furthermore, the sounds of street music can be disorienting for VIPs, especially when they decide to cross the street because they cannot hear the audible signals or recognise when public transport vehicles such as buses or trams arrive. This is an important factor as they rely on auditory perception.

For VIPs, busy environments are mostly unfavourable. They often described their experience and perceptions of central Melbourne as a busy and noisy environment. Evidence that indicates how the city has become more crowded in past years—which prevents people from walking unhindered—can be found in the VIPs' experiences. As VIP-6 mentioned, she was obliged to buy a new cane at least once a year as her cane often breaks. The participant's interpretation is that in busier environments, with the proliferation of smartphones, perhaps people are less attentive to their environment and crash into other people and objects more easily.

However, observations during the walking interviews were that people (individually or in groups) were attentive when a VIP was walking on the street. They were patient and gave way to make it easier for them to navigate. In one case, in Federation Square, which is one of the main public spaces in central Melbourne, the participants were exploring the area and there were a few small gatherings of families and children, as it was close to Christmas. Children were playing around and when the participant approached them, the guardians warned them to "give way" to "people." In another example, at an intersection where a large group of people were waiting for the pedestrian lights to turn green, they warned each other to move out of the way when they saw that a VIP with a white cane was approaching. In one case, a non-VIP was even giving directions to assist the participant. When the participants were asked about their feelings about people giving way, they responded that people are trying to do what is right and it is appreciated. Even in open areas such as Flinders Street Railway Station, directly opposite Federation Square, where there is adequate space to move around, people gave way to VIPs.

It was understood from VIPs' diaries that they do not only focus on their own navigation but also others around them. For instance, VIP-3 explained that he prefers wider footpaths as they allow him to move more freely. When he is getting close to his destination, he needs to reduce his walking speed to find the entrance, and on wide footpaths, he does not need to think about people behind him, as he may interrupt their walking.

Though a barrier-free environment is important to VIPs for smooth walking, the participants reported that sometimes they prefer to walk in busy main streets rather than quiet laneways because the former street type is more legible for them; unless they are very familiar with the alternative route. Their perception of the physical environment was therefore different based on the volume of pedestrians and noise; there was no agreement that all quiet routes are favourable though, or that all main streets should be avoided. In other words, the social aspects were a key consideration.

5.2. Wayfinding

Wayfinding was one of the main concerns for VIPs, aligning with the dominant focus of research to date. The wayfinding experience of VIPs was best explained in the diary recordings. There were circumstances when people around them had a positive role in assisting with navigation. For example, in one diary recording it was stated: "I remember someone was pushing a trolley, [making] some noise, so I was able to follow them. It was quite a useful thing, someone just walking in front of you'' (VIP-3).

During the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, the presence or absence of people in urban spaces affected VIPs' experiences. VIP-5 recalled an experience travelling to a medical appointment in the city where he could not find the address the few people he was able to ask for assistance were unfamiliar with the area. By contrast, traffic congestion eased during the pandemic, making it easier and safer for VIPs to navigate the city on their own.

VIPs have many difficulties engaging with people around them. As VIP-8 explained, it is hard for them to understand whether the person sitting next to them is interested in having a conversation or not. In the walking interviews, it was noticeable that in open areas such as Federation Square, people were not gazing at a person with a white cane. However, while walking on sidewalks, people were staring and noticing them immediately. During the walking interviews, the lack of communication between VIPs and non-VIPs was visible. For instance, some were smiling and politely apologising to the researcher (who was mostly walking behind or within a distance from the participant to reduce the bias of the method) in case they thought they were in the VIP's way. Only one person directly mentioned it to the VIP. One participant noted this issue in a diary recording:

> I just perceive people as going about their day-to-day business. I generally do not interact with strangers unless I am asking for assistance or directions, or by chance I may have a conversation with somebody. Being vision impaired, I am also conscious of my own safety and security. (VIP-8)

5.3. Socio-Fugal and Socio-Petal Props

It is very common for VIPs to use mobility devices to navigate the urban environment. When they were asked how they feel about them, different views emerged.

A participant stated that despite having some vision, she uses her white cane to notify people around her and to indicate that she is visually impaired in case she bumps into someone or is not able to detect something. She also explained that white canes can change people's directions of movement:

> I know somebody who calls their cane Moses because of the story from the Bible where Moses was known to part the sea and the ocean when he commanded, and the ocean went to both sides and opened up a clear part in the middle and this person says whenever she is down in the street it seems to make people move to each side and then she gets a clear pass. (VIP-7)

The experience of one participant who uses a white cane and a guide dog presented another aspect of social relations. Based on his experiences, the guide dog attracts people from different groups such as students, parents, and their children which creates a positive interaction; however, while using the white cane he mostly feels "hapless or useless" (VIP-5). Consequently, he generally prefers to use the guide dog over the white cane when he can.

6. Conclusions

This article aimed to advance understanding of the social encounters of VIPs in public spaces, using Melbourne as a case study. VIPs do not have the perception of being excluded from public spaces, however. In some settings, they are less likely to experience some of the social aspects of urban spaces.

The findings indicate that VIPs use public spaces almost exclusively for necessary activities. They rarely engage in unplanned walks or mingle because of tripping hazards, exchange ideas because it is not easy to make contact, fully enjoy the public space because of barriers and distractions, and feel a sense of belonging in the environment because there are fewer opportunities for sensory stimulation. As a result, they are less likely to be in public spaces alone or for unnecessary purposes.

The question arises of how urban space can be upgraded to increase VIP participation, beyond a limited set of highly necessary activities. Beyond standards for the design of accessible facilities, what can be done to promote VIP participation in the public life of cities? What public space design strategies would create a more favourable environment for social exchange and encourage them to spend more unstructured time in public spaces? As Fitzsimons (2017, p. 93) writes: "There are no regulations to manage whether designers convey beauty or surprise factors in their designs. It is limited to indicators to facilitate cane users." Moreover, Lefebvre (1996, p. 195) argues:

> The right to the city…stipulates the right to meetings and gatherings…the need for social life and a centre, the need and the function of play, and the symbolic functions of space (close to what exists over and above what is classified) because it…gives rise to rhetoric, which only poets can call by its name: desire.

In some interviews it was indicated that people with vision are less attentive to VIPs because they tend to rush to their destinations, focusing on their mobile phones. Observations taken during the walking interviews captured a different scenario, as many passers-by were offering help, notifying each other, or clearing the way for VIPs. Here, another issue may arise because giving way to VIPs and separating them more than usual in public space had a negative impact. On the one hand, it provides an easier walking experience for VIPs, but, on the other hand, VIPs may interpret the greater separation as them being regarded as "others" in urban space. Another question it raises is whether white canes hinder the kinds of "triangulations" that bring people together. In contrast, guide dogs act as a third element that mostly attracts people and facilitates conversations between VIPs and people around them. Therefore, the cane seems largely socio-fugal while the guide dog is mostly socio-petal.

This article presented an approach to understanding barriers to the participation of VIPs in the city that differed from a conventional access point of view. It found that a desirable space is more than one that is just free from physical barriers. For instance, some participants preferred main streets—though busier—over quieter lanes. Having people around—walking or sitting—is not always a problem for VIPs on busy streets. Though busy streets create difficulties in terms of navigation, there are more people to assist VIPs with wayfinding issues, increasing their sense of security when reaching out for assistance. Meanwhile, places such as arcades—when quiet—are suitable for conversations because VIPs find it easier to hear due to fewer noise distractions.

The findings illuminated unmediated conflicts between VIPs and various aspects of urbanity: from intense pedestrian flows to street music, from fixed urban furniture to informally parked bicycles and scooters. Consequently, VIPs perceive urban spaces as hostile and tend to avoid them beyond what's required for necessary activities. VIPs' desires for simplicity of navigation are in strong contrast with the dynamic diversity of central Melbourne's street life. However, random urban encounters inevitably emerge and can be enabled through the "soft" triangulation facilitated by fluffy guide dogs, or the mutual empathy between VIPs and rough sleepers. These key social factors have a distinct spatiality. Dogs need green spaces (Carter, 2016) while rough sleepers typically appropriate underutilised small setbacks.

Designing public places that capture the desires of VIPs and non-VIPs may be challenging because VIPs' perception of their environment is so different to non-VIPs. Built form and the social environment both have crucial roles to play if we are to design urban spaces that are

inclusive of VIPs. Designing for more socio-petal spaces remains a challenge. This will certainly require non-VIPs to be attentive to the specific ways that VIPs live in the city.

To create a more user-friendly environment for VIPs it is important to understand what factors encourage their participation in the city beyond necessary activities; what elements and environments would entice them to spend more time? Though creating a barrier-free environment can facilitate smooth navigation, focusing on their abilities to perceive the environment with non-visual senses could enrich experience their experience of the environment. A considered approach to design that supports VIPs' use of urban space could produce a more dynamic yet more inclusive city by increasing opportunities for social encounters.

Social equity in relation to VIPs shouldn't be reduced to questions of wayfinding and technical aids for navigation. Rather, increased focus should be devoted to questions of VIPs' participation in urban space and public life. This research has focused on urban form aspects of VIPs' experiences in central Melbourne and revealed a set of design aspects that afford—often indirectly—more random social encounters between VIPs and others.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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