Contact Zones:

Experiences of cultural diversity and rapid neighbourhood change among Anglo-Celtic and long term elderly residents in Ashfield.

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Centre for Research on Social Inclusion
Macquarie University
Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to the residents, old and new, of Ashfield, all of whom are working hard to create a sense of home and community for themselves there. I owe a special thanks to the senior citizens who participated in the project and shared their lives and experiences with me. For reasons of anonymity, I am unable to name them here. I am also indebted to the various community workers and local religious leaders who have assisted the project, especially Janine Fullin at Ashfield Council, Reverend John Morris of the Ashfield Baptist Church and Reverend Bill Crews of Ashfield Uniting Church, and their respective congregations. Thanks are also due to the Ashfield Combined Pensioners Association, the National Seniors Association and the Greek Older Women’s network for their advice and assistance with the project. I am also grateful to those members of Ashfield’s Chinese community who have responded to the issues raised in this project with warmth, generosity and an openness to dialogue. Credit is also due to Dr Selvaraj Velayutham who assisted with fieldwork observation and conducted a number of interviews. Finally I wish to express my sincerest thanks to the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University who funded this research as part of my postdoctoral fellowship there between 2002 and 2004.

Dr Amanda Wise

Executive Summary

This report details research undertaken in the multicultural Sydney suburb of Ashfield. The study investigated the quality of intercommunal relations with a focus on experiences among elderly Anglo-Celtic senior citizens who are long term residents of the area. It explores their perceptions of the recent urban changes brought by the recent wave of Chinese immigration to the area. It included a smaller sub-study of non-Anglo long term residents and their experience of these changes.

The study found a significant discomfort with the scale and type of change brought to the area, especially around shop style and Chinese language signage. The study also found that the social aspects of aging and the particular challenges elderly residents face, have a strong impact on their ability to cope with the scale and speed of change in the local area. The study found that any celebration of multicultural place identity must at the same time recognise and support the belonging and contribution of the long term elderly residents. The study recommends that the town centre been seen as a particularly important space of belonging and provides an important social support context through shopkeepers for socially disempowered elderly people.

The study also found a strong desire among all groups for greater levels of intercultural contact, dialogue and friendship in the local suburb, and a desire to create an urban environment in Ashfield accessible and enjoyable to all residents.

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Section One –
Introduction & Research
Context

Introduction

Research Team
The research for Contact Zones was undertaken by Dr Amanda Wise, a research fellow at the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University. She has an interdisciplinary background, specialising in cultural studies, urban anthropology and sociology. She has particular expertise in the qualitative study of refugees, migration and lived experiences of multiculturalism. Dr Selvaraj Velayutham acted as senior research assistant on the project conducting interviews with members of the Indian and Chinese communities.

The Research Context

Outline & objectives of the project

Contact Zones is the first in-depth study in Australia to explore grounded, interethnic relations between Anglo-Celtic elderly and NESB migrants at the local, suburban level. Anglo-Celtic elderly are often stereotyped in Australia as resistant to cultural change and more likely than other demographic groups to support the anti-multicultural rhetoric espoused by right-wing groups such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. Despite this, there has been little qualitative research into how this sub-group experience and respond to cultural diversity in their daily lives.

The study is based in the culturally diverse Sydney suburb of Ashfield. Ashfield has become home to a large number of migrants from mainland China during the last ten years who have created a strong presence on the Ashfield shopping strip, now known in some circles as Sydney’s ‘Little Shanghai’.

The research investigates how elderly Anglo-Celtic long-term residents are experiencing cultural diversity and the rapid changes that the recent wave of Chinese migrants have brought to the suburb. In addition, the study included a small component researching how long-term residents from Italian, Greek, and Indian migrant backgrounds are responding to these changes.

The study employs the notion of ‘multiculturalism as place-sharing’ to signal the fact that diversity exists in real, lived environments. Such an approach avoids speaking of diversity in the abstract terms of multicultural policy, and instead implies layers of ethnically different individuals inhabiting suburbs and urban environments, corporeally interacting with one another as neighbours, shoppers, workers; rubbing up against one another in a myriad of shared, everyday situations.
There were six key research questions:

1. What are the main sites of interethnic contact in Ashfield? (Shopping, neighbouring, clubs, etc.)

2. What experiences do ethnically different participants have of cross-cultural encounters in these places?

3. How do the long-term Anglo-Celtic elderly and long-term NESB residents experience the rapid changes to the suburb brought about by the recent wave of Chinese-speaking migrants? How are these longer-term residents responding and adapting to these changes?

4. Do these changes have an impact on their feelings of homeliness, community and belonging in Ashfield?

5. Are their particular areas of tension or discomfort?

6. Are there situations where individuals have found or created points of affinity across difference? If so, what characterises them?

7. In what ways do the challenges of ageing factor into how elderly Anglo-Celtic residents experience the changes brought by recent migration to the area?

The aim was to:

1. Identify key areas of need for achieving interethnic community harmony;

2. Identify already existing strategies people use in their everyday lives for ‘connecting across difference’;

3. Identify lessons for the development of new, locally based community harmony programmes

4. Create a greater understanding of the challenges to creating a sense of belonging for the culturally diverse residents of Ashfield.
**Background & Context of Ashfield**

**Ashfield is located** about twenty-five minutes west of Sydney’s CBD and forms the gateway to the city’s working-class multicultural suburban heartland. It is an old federation suburb, emanating a sense of genteel decay in its housing, roads and high street. Prior to the Second World War it was seen as a green escape from the urban, industrial poverty of inner-city Sydney, a place where the middle-classes moved to enjoy backyards and green public space. Eventually it contained a mixture of working-class and middle-class residents, Catholic and Protestant respectively represented in the suburb’s abundant churches. Many of its longer term residents worked in one of the factories in the local area; the now closed biscuit and electronic factories commonly mentioned as large local employers.

Up until the war, Ashfield was almost entirely Anglo-Celtic but with the post-war migration boom, it became quite a diverse area with large numbers of Greek, Italian and Polish residents making the suburb home during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1970s and 80s Lebanese and Turkish people moved to the area, and more recently, large numbers of Indian and Chinese migrants came to Ashfield, the latter bringing the most profound changes to the local urban landscape.

**What most characterises Ashfield today** is the Chinese commercial presence along its main shopping strip on Liverpool Road, home to around one-hundred small street front shops and a small shopping mall. The change has been rapid. In the last ten years the street-scape has transformed from a mix of Anglo, Italian and Greek shopping. Today, about eighty-five percent of the shops along the Ashfield high street are Chinese small businesses, predominantly restaurants and small supermarkets.

To put this in perspective, according to the 2002 Census data, eleven percent of Ashfield residents speak a Chinese language at home while long term resident Anglo-Celtic seniors make up an estimated ten to fifteen percent of the total population of about forty-nine percent Australian born.

Ashfield’s Chinese-born population exploded during the 1990s due to a unique set of circumstances. The then Hawke Labor government offered permanent residency to some 42,000 Chinese students who were studying in Australia at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. These numbers swelled to an estimated 100,000 through the 1990s due to the fact that the original visa holders were able to bring out family from China under Australia’s then family reunion migration scheme. Most made Sydney their home and many of these migrants ended up in Ashfield, which is known among them as ‘Little Shanghai’ due to the large concentration of Shanghai-nese who made the suburb home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Ashfield population</th>
<th>39,500</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian born</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born Overseas</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Overseas born from Non-English speaking country</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak a Chinese Language at home</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated percentage of Anglo-Celtic senior citizens</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2001 Census: Population of Ashfield LGA*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>2001 Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Italy</td>
<td>2300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>800</td>
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<td>Korea</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
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<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>200</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2001 Census: Top NESB born groups in Ashfield
Methodology

The research involved:

1. **A year of ethnographic fieldwork** participating in ‘everyday’; Ashfield;

   - Attending senior citizen’s groups, RSL, leagues and lawn bowls clubs;
   
   - Extensive time spent watching and participating in the local shopping centre, both on the main street (Liverpool Rd) and in the Ashfield Mall;
   
   - Shopping with local residents;
   
   - Attending local churches;
   
   - Watching and participating in various neighbouring activities;
   
   - Living full-time in the suburb myself.

2. **Interviews**

   - Forty individual in-depth interviews of about three-hours in length with elderly Anglo-Celtic residents, constituting about two-thirds of the interviews. The balance involved interviews with Greek, Indian, Polish, Dutch, Italian and Chinese residents.

   - A series of group discussions with local senior citizen’s groups.

   - Interviews with council staff, social workers and religious ministers.
Section Two – Findings

Chinese perceptions of Ashfield

What attracts Chinese residents to Ashfield?

The vibrant Chinese shopping centre attracts Chinese shoppers from Ashfield and much farther afield. Chinese come from all of Sydney, from as far away as Lindfield and even weekend visitors from Canberra, as the following extract with a local Chinese shopkeeper attests:

Even the Chinese students in Canberra, they need to buy grocery they go to Ashfield. One day at the GO-GO supermarket… (I asked) where do you come from? They say they drive the car from Canberra because here the price is cheap. … Because the Chinese grocers become more and more. Now… more than 10 grocery supermarket here. So the competition is very stiff and the price become lower and lower. And the customers they are not only Ashfield residents but also from other council, North Sydney, Strathfield, western suburb.

Moreover, the festivals and other Chinese-related activities are a major attraction to non-local Chinese visitors as this interviewee attests:

During the Chinese festivals, Spring festival, Lantern festival, there are Chinese activities, Chinese concert, and Chinese opera. At the Ashfield Town Hall, you can hire the town hall and they give presentation. And lots of Chinese come here as far as from Hornsby, North Sydney and Eastern Sydney, Kingsford, Maroubra.

Based on my interviews and casual conversations with local Chinese, there are a few key reasons Chinese residents are attracted to Ashfield:

- The presence of other Chinese.
- The neighbouring and shopping networks provided by other Chinese with whom they share a culture and language.
- The availability of Chinese shopping and services.
- Low rent and the high number of flats in the area.
- Ashfield is relatively close to the CBD and it is on the train-line.
- The Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS) is located in Ashfield.
- The number of ‘good schools’ in the area, those reported are: Trinity Grammar, Presbyterian Ladies College, Haberfield, Summer Hill and Ashfield primary schools. There are also good quality coaching colleges and the local Chinese language ‘Saturday’ school.
For example, this young woman explains that it was the Chinese language abilities of the local shopkeepers that attracted her mother and father to live in the area:

> Because my mum cannot speak English...she feels very comfortable when she shops at the shopping centre because so many Chinese people there. So even though she can’t speak English she can still do the shopping. … Because there are so many Chinese people around, it is easier for her.

And another:

> My father can speak English. But because my father needs to do his job and he has no time to do the shopping or attend to family matters. So all these things are left for my mum. And it is better for her to shop in Ashfield because she doesn’t speak English.

The availability of familiar food is also an important attraction as this young woman, a recent immigrant from Shanghai, points out:

> I like Chinese restaurant in Ashfield because it is hard for me to change in terms of my diet....

And a middle aged man:

> You know the Chinese are not used to eating sausage, sandwiches.. they like to eat cabbage, soya beans .. So more and more Chinese came here for the food...

Nonetheless, although Ashfield has many attractions, many Chinese feel the suburb is not as appealing as it might be. Many feel Ashfield is noisy and dirty and express very similar opinions to non-Chinese residents. For example:

> I think the environment in Ashfield is not very good, it is not so clean than other suburb. Other suburbs are nicer.
Perceptions about relationships to non-Chinese residents

The small number of interviews conducted with local Chinese residents indicated a strong support for greater cross-cultural contact, and a support for Chinese signage translation.

Some Australian, they say “too many Chinese shops and too many Chinese character (sign boards) – we English speaking people, we don’t understand. What is the character of the shop, we don’t understand…” But you know, in here, in this society, in our community, the official language is English. The main stream is English people. So I think we should have translations on all our signs. Anyway we are immigrant, we should… if we go to Rome we should learn what is custom, yes we are Chinese but we don’t say we are Chinese, we are Chinese-Australian. If I am an Australian citizen, we should be involved in the mainstream. We keep our own culture and language, but also involve with the other people. It is the principle.

This is a typical comment on the shops along Liverpool Road.

They should organise all the shop-owners to have a meeting, to discuss and to give them the municipal council’s regulations and rules. To unify, our Ashfield municipal outlook and surrounding should be unified. So I think the Chinese merchants/shop owners they will obey after they learn…there is no one to tell them, how to do it. That is the problem. I think the chamber of commerce should do it.

And on opportunities to mix with other communities:

Some days, you know… the council hold special day, especially to entertain the seniors – some Chinese, some Italians, some English, some Koreans then we mix together – once in a year. The chance is too little…
Mobility, Length of Residence & the Anglo-Celtic Elderly

Contact Zones was not simply a study of racism and responses to cultural difference. Age and length of residence emerged as central determining factors in experiences of cultural diversity.

- One of the most important findings was a direct correlation between age, declining physical mobility and feelings of alienation from the ‘new’ Ashfield.

Almost without exception, those no longer able to drive, or who were physically not well enough to travel far on public transport were also those with the strongest resentment about the changes in Ashfield. This group were predominantly confined to the local suburb for their shopping activities and thus felt a greater sense of alienation in the changed shopping-scape and the forms of sociality it no longer offered.

- Conversely, those still mobile enough, especially those still able to drive, often simply withdrew to neighbouring suburbs such as Summer Hill, Leichhardt or Burwood to do their shopping.

- The older shopping experiences represented an important form of belonging and community. Familiar shops, a network of shopkeepers familiar to the customers and with whom they enjoyed friendly interactions offered an important point of social contact in otherwise often lonely and isolated lives.

- The change in Ashfield’s shopping landscape represents a physical and social break with the kind of community they felt they belonged to. In its place is something they perceive to be foreign and unwelcoming.

George: I regarded Ashfield as my suburb, my shopping centre. These are my shops. My shops you had a friendly face. Today my shops have been replaced by other shops where I’m not welcome. Mostly you go into the shops as a non-Chinese, and the attention is curt, off-hand, unhelpful. …Rather than cause any unpleasantness, all you can do is just walk out, and go further afield to do your shopping.

As George’s comments signal, this retreat to alternative suburbs is not simply a matter of seeking out shops more culturally suitable to their shopping needs, although that was certainly a strong factor. Rather, there was strong evidence that shopping represented a primary social activity in the lives of many of the local elderly.

Aileen: Oh we knew the shop owners and we were able to have a conversation with them about things other than things they were selling. You know, a little friendly chat at the counter, that kind of thing.

Today, many of the shops and small restaurants do not have English speaking shop-keepers. The newer shops favoured by Chinese business owners cater primarily to a Chinese clientele, selling wares unfamiliar to many longer-term Anglo-Celtic residents.
Shopping

Signs & Language

The most prominent area of discomfort among not only Anglo-Celtic senior citizens but also older long-term residents of other backgrounds—especially Greek, Italian, Polish and Indian—had to do with the predominance of non-English signage without translation along the Ashfield main street. Signage particularly disliked include:

- Chinese language posters that entirely cover the windows of many stores.
- Lack of design quality.
- Multiple posters featuring phone-card advertisements that seemed to be used as much for wall paper to cover the window as for genuine advertising.
- Large poster sized Chinese language menus in the windows. Translations are often not provided, or when they do, they are small and offer only rudimentary information.
- This eye-level signage is perceived as an alienating barrier to non-Chinese speaking residents.

Marjorie: The Chinese signs, they say to me ‘don’t enter’. Its saying to me ‘don’t come in’. ‘You can’t read these signs, so you’re not welcome’.

Bill: Its changed, when I first came here the many of the shops, the fruit shops were the Greeks or the Italians. Now they’ve changed over recent years, they’re Chinese the big majority. Like Mary said, you go in these shops and everything’s written up in Chinese, and if you don’t read the fine print you don’t know what you’re buying. Most of the prices are in Chinese and most of the descriptions. So you’re just lost really. Why would you go in there?
The everyday experience of Chinese language signs

To illustrate this, I'd like to relate a vignette from one of my research days on Liverpool Road. I observed an elderly Anglo-Celtic man at the bus-stop opposite the mall looking into the window of the Chinese food outlet which has lots of unfamiliar (if you're not Chinese) small plates of food on display in window, with tags in Chinese, or if an English translation is provided it is quite rudimentary – such as ‘fish’ or ‘chicken’. The man looks in the window with a somewhat confused look on his face, clearly just trying to work out what the things are. He then sits back down on the bus-stop seat.

A bit later a Chinese couple come by, stand at the same window and look in. They are reading the signs on each food item, seem to be registering the prices, they have an open interested look on their face. The Chinese couple can obviously read the signs which tell them a bit about what the window things might be. If they've tried that item before then they probably already have a sensory picture of it, its feel, its texture, consistency, taste, how you cook it, what you might put it with. If they haven’t the sign will probably give them enough clues or pointers to similar things so that they can approximate an idea of what it is. So already we can see that the Chinese couple have all these ideas and labels and associations that flower in front of them when they view that window and read the signs—things that might entice them in, produce in their imaginations certain possibilities about what might lie within. They entered the shop.

What does this story tell us? At the simplest level, the function of language is to attach meanings to things. We learn to see a thing by learning to describe it. Belonging to a place, having a sense of it in all its dimensions, requires the ability to make meaning of things and places. The things in jars, in windows. The ability to read the signs opens up a whole internal landscape for that shop. The inability to read the signs leaves that window into the shop closed. ‘It’s a barrier’ as one of the study participants said. If a good proportion of a local town centre is occupied by shops with signage many residents can’t read, then a whole part of the local landscape is closed to that population, or at least made more difficult to access, experience and discover.

Often when the issue of foreign language signage is raised by councils, accusations of racism and xenophobia fly. The point I am making here is rather different.

- I am *not* advocating a ban on foreign language signage in Ashfield.
- I am advocating a policy of *translation* for all signage in Ashfield where feasible.
Ashfield is in the unusual situation where one ethnic group dominates the commercial presence in the town centre, yet do not constitute the majority of the population, which is much more ethnically diverse than the main street would lead visitors to believe.

- Far from being a xenophobic, anti-multicultural response, requiring English translations encourages multiculturalism. Translations are more likely to attract a diverse clientele into the shop creating more possibilities for intercultural contact and interethnic learning.

- Ashfield’s population is not just made up of Anglo-Celtic English speakers and Mandarin/Cantonese speaking Chinese. There are a myriad of language groups living in Ashfield and therefore English is the only practical common language.

- Other NESB groups felt as excluded by the Chinese language signage as the Anglo-Celtic elderly. The feedback from other ethnic groups interviewed for this project indicated a clear and strong preference amongst all of them for English translations in all shop windows.

The lack of English speaking shopkeepers in many of these newer shops was also an issue for most of the seniors (of all backgrounds) interviewed for the project. The following are very typical of the sorts of comments received:

**Marjorie:** We did try, we did try one of the new Chinese restaurants here. … the menu was not in English at all and the waiter didn’t seem to speak English . You’d have to just point to something so we didn’t know what we were eating at all. We couldn’t wait to get out of there. The waiters just made us feel unwelcome. They made it obvious that it was an imposition on them that they had to serve people who weren’t Chinese.

**Jack:** We thought we’d try one of the little Chinese supermarkets one day. We went looking for some noodles. We didn’t find what we were looking for. Rice noodles and we couldn’t find any. And nobody was helpful. They couldn’t speak English so they couldn’t understand what we wanted anyway. And they just ignored us. So that was it. We gave up after that.

For many seniors, the lack of English precludes them from entering or using these shops and prohibits the formation of friendly relationships with neighbourhood shopkeepers. It has a particular impact on long-term elderly residents for whom relations (often just of the ‘hello, how are you today’ variety) can represent one of the few forms of belonging and social connection in their lives. Small gestures of politeness and recognition from shopkeepers are enormously important for this demographic and indeed, to other non-Chinese residents who participated in this study.
Manners, rituals & personal space

There are also cultural differences around manners, personal space and social rituals which cause friction, particularly in relation to shop-keeper customer interactions, and interactions in crowded shopping spaces. Here are a couple of examples:

Arthur: The Chinese I find very very arrogant in the shops. They’ll push you out of the way, there’s no please or excuse me.

Betty: Its not as though you’re walking in (to the Ashfield restaurants) and you know instantly that you’re going to be welcome there.

• Very similar feelings were expressed by the other ethnic groups represented in the study.

The point to stress is that although such comments often end up in potentially racist evaluations, they nonetheless express real cultural differences in manners, the use of social space and social rituals. When the differences are large and the new group are present in significant numbers, they can cause distress, frustration and discomfort.

• Often little recognition is given to the fact that living with cultural difference can be confusing, frustrating and uncomfortable.

Olga (Macedonian): They – I don’t know whether it is that they’ve never learned to queue. We came from a country where we learned to queue. But even down at the bus stop, they will get on the bus irrespective of whether you’ve got on the bus or not. It makes it all very stressful.

Shanti (Indian): And also the pushiness and the abruptness, … now I’m not being racist. But I’ve experienced this even in their countries when I was visiting there, right? Yes, there’s this real abruptness and pushy habits. And, and there is no excuse me. And they will push you out of the way. And if you were standing there and you were next to be served and suddenly you get ‘whoop’ and somebody else’s in front of you in the line. … So I don’t go to the shops anymore, I try not to go into them. I just go to Summer Hill.

Voula (Greek): I would go to their shops if they make more welcome. Then I don’t mind. I have my Chinese neighbours, they are nice, very polite. But the shops I don’t feel welcome anymore.

These narratives show the kinds of discomfts that emerge when ideas about what a ‘welcoming body’ should do differ, and indeed ideas about where welcoming bodies should be found and how they should respond at particular moments. For many Chinese shopkeepers the most polite way to deal with customers is to deal briskly and efficiently with them, there is often shyness about engaging in conversation because of language difficulties so to avoid embarrassment they’ll avoid eye contact.
Although many non-Chinese customers would never expect interaction of any kind in a supermarket, for example, the social field of small shops is different, traditionally places where interaction and a little exchange are commonplace. There are also simply bodily misreadings, a hand gesture missed, an expectation of a shared look or smile on one side but not the other.

- Many of the Anglo-Celtic seniors in this study came from a generation where intimate space is even wider than many Anglos of a younger generation today.
- For Anglo-Celtic seniors bodily control, comportment, and a measured bodily space are extraordinarily important aspects of bodily homeliness.

However context is also important and recognised as such by most Ashfield locals. For many of the elderly in Ashfield its not so much difference per se, but the very presence of difference in a formerly comfortable and familiar environment:

*Mary* (British Migrant, resident 40 years): *It’s not so much the food. I can go to Chinatown, for yum cha, but I’m talking about this is where we live. This is how its affecting us.*

For Mary, the cultural differences encountered on the Ashfield shopping street are much more of an issue in her home suburb than if she were to make a journey to the place she perceives to belong properly to the Chinese: Chinatown. When she says so emphatically ‘I’m talking about this is where we live, this is how its affecting us’, she is communicating the importance to her of a comfortable familiarity and ease of social interaction in the creation of homeliness. For her, its comfortable to accept difference when travelling, but at home there is a sense that homeliness requires an anticipatable outcome.
Shop styles and space use on Liverpool Road

A major area of discontent is the change in the physical appearance of the street shops along Liverpool Road.

- The aesthetic aspects of the new shops was the number one point of unhappiness with the new Ashfield.
- The research did not find a single interviewee who felt the main street shopping was enjoyable to participate in, walk along or look at. Interviewees felt the aesthetic style of the shops along Liverpool Road was a major disincentive to entering them.

Howard: You go into these shops and they’ve built the aisles where you can barely walk a shoulder square. You can’t walk straight, you’ve got to sidle along sideways. Its dark, its gloomy, the front doors and windows are plastered with posters. You cannot see in, and you cannot see out. Inside the light is never bright, it is dark. Stuff is stacked in such a way that it is difficult to move. And boxes protrude onto the pavement.

Erma: If you go to some of the shops down in Ashfield now, and you’ll also find out in their windows, their windows are completely blocked off …. There’s not even a view into the shop. Its totally blocked off.

Amanda: How does that make you feel?

Erma: Keep back. It makes me feel keep back.

Horace: It makes me feel isolated. I came here to live like an Australian, to have a free life. Free, free moving, free, the freedom seems to have gone. Its changing completely and utterly. … I never felt like that with the Italians or Greeks.
**John and Rose:** The feeling I have in Ashfield is if you have to walk down the main street, walk quickly to get away from the noise and the dirt and people’s heads are down. And get past the doorways. The Ashfield shops, the doorways – they’re really just slots in the wall. And they don’t have window displays... you can’t look into the store. They have it cluttered. And the aisles are narrow and its very dark — you just don’t want to go in.

**Esther:** I hate all those posters on the walls of Chinese shops they cover the entire window with them. I mean it’s a barrier isn’t it.

**Harold:** Here in Ashfield, people miss the old kind of shopping. The shops now, you find pokey little rooms where you don’t have enough room to swing a cat. You walk in and it’s a very unfriendly atmosphere.

**Magda (Polish migrant, resident 40 years):** Nobody here goes into the shops. Because you can’t see inside the shop. Because the aisles are about that narrow. One shop is converted into two. What used to be one shop is now two shops. Everything that you can see there is in a language completely foreign to you. I used to feel at home in Australia, but not in Ashfield, not anymore.
The above interview extracts are very typical of comments received. The areas of most discomfort can be summarised as follows:

- Dislike of posters messily pasted to entirely cover shop windows.
- Dislike of shops that do not provide a window view into the store. Many interviewees described this as a kind of ‘barrier’ from entering the shop.
- Discomfort with small size of shops, perceived as crowded and with overly narrow aisle width.
- Lack of lighting in the shops.
- Perceptions of uncleanliness; dirty floors, the fish shop washing their floor onto the footpath near the bus stop.
- Unattractive signage with lack of design quality.
- Positive examples of new shops raised in interviews include the ‘Happy Cup’ Asian drink shop.

- All interviewees were positive toward the Chinese owned shops in the Ashfield mall, particularly the coffee shop and the shops in the food court. These shops serviced a non-ethno-specific clientele, had higher design quality and generally had English-speaking counter staff. A number of interviewees mentioned friendly encounters with these staff and a growing level of familiarity developed through regular visits to these shops.

- This signals that it is not the presence of the Chinese shops and shopkeepers per se that is of concern for longer term residents.

- An awareness of aesthetics in shop design can also make a real difference. Contrast the following narrative from one 70 year old Anglo woman about neighbouring Italian Haberfield with the earlier ones on Ashfield and the shop windows there:

  I love walking along Haberfield. Even at the fruit shop there are flowers and fruit and its open you can have a look at it. And … it’s got windows and you can see the people in there and what they are doing. The bank – the bank is pretty boring because it’s all closed in. Then you’ve got the chocolate shop and you’ve got the delicatessens and the cheeses and all the different sausages and things that the Italians eat. You know, all in the window. And you can see all their wares. It’s lovely. It does make a difference. The shops are clean and light and open. … Even if you’re not interested in buying anything there, even if its not something we would really eat, its still interesting, you’ll think … ooh look at that.

- ‘Pretty’ displays, light, colour and large windows that invite you to look in all function to welcome passers by to engage with the shop. Those unfamiliar can look in safely and see what’s happening inside. Lightness creates a less threatening atmosphere and the display of wares allows passers by to become familiar with the culturally unfamiliar.
Place & Belonging

Many interviewees, both Anglo and longer-term migrant residents felt that the sheer number of Chinese commercial premises along Liverpool Road created a feeling that this was ‘Little Shanghai’ and was no longer a place they felt they belonged to, despite the fact the Chinese are only one ethnic group among many residing locally.

They felt that the public celebration of Ashfield’s new Chinatown status equated to their symbolic exclusion. Many felt that their group’s contribution to the area was not recognised in Ashfield’s symbolic landscape.

Here is an example from one of the group interviews:

| Bob (Anglo): | Is there a statue to the creator of Ashfield? No. But there’s a statue to a Chinese businessman. |
| Maria (Greek lady): | To the Chinese. Yes, that’s right. No statue to anyone else. Its not just their suburb you know. |
| Bob: | Because the Chinese see that statue, they see that oh this is our suburb, this is our culture, Ashfield is just a Chinese suburb. |

The study found equal resentment among both Anglo-Celtic elderly and the other longer-term migrant groups who felt that it was inappropriate to celebrate only one group in a culturally diverse suburb.

- A key finding is that the other long-term migrant groups in the area felt their contribution and belonging to Ashfield was discounted in the official celebration of Ashfield as the new Chinatown.
Arguments over colour scheme in Ashfield main-street upgrade

During the course of the study there emerged a local debate around the official colour scheme to be used along the main street of Ashfield during a street-scape upgrade. The colour proposal and responses to it embodies several of the key themes that emerged throughout the study.

The colour scheme debate

Ashfield council was proposing that bins, seating, signs, awnings and lighting be painted red with golden yellow trim in reference to the Chinese theme in Ashfield. The council has a consultative committee made up of representatives from the various seniors groups in Ashfield (Anglo and non-Anglo). The seniors who were at that meeting said that they asked for green or something more ‘relaxing’ (was the word they used), because they found Ashfield to be such a busy and unrestful place. Here is how one of them described the meeting to me:

Rose: We were at the Seniors committee meeting and, it was put to us by the council people, they wanted to know what we thought of the Liverpool Rd upgrade that they’re doing. And they said they were going to have tree things, bins, seats, and that, and they were going to be bright red.

With all the traffic going up and down and all the signs on the shops and the signs everywhere and the heat in Australia and it’s a busy narrow road. We all thought that bright red would be awful. So we said oh, wouldn’t it be nice if they were just green. Green bins and everything. Because they were going to be red and gold.

And I said, what about green and gold. And then someone said, yes, and that’s Australian colours. And then something was mentioned that you know, the red and gold was the Chinese colours and that. And people said, and George was there, the Chinese guy. And one of the ladies turned around and she said, George, you know we love you dearly, that’s not the reason we don’t want the red. But when it was reported in the local paper, there was definitely a stance toward as if we had been anti-, as if we were being racist.

Opposition to the Red and Gold colour scheme was equally strong amongst the non-Anglo residents interviewed for the project.

Melena (Greek migrant): If they had red and gold I would feel very much not wanted, no, pushed out. You know? Because they are Chinese colours.
The proposal for a Red and Gold colour scheme on the Liverpool road upgrade elicited heated emotional responses from seniors of Anglo and non-Anglo backgrounds interviewed for the research.

- In their view, it was a question of how official street colours signal ‘who Ashfield represents and who belongs there’.

- To them the red and gold felt like an official statement that this place was no longer theirs.

- The seniors interviewed for the project seem to be quite happy with the alternative proposal for a colour scheme in ‘earthen or heritage red with creamy yellow’.

- Many felt that that the new colours are more restful and are more positive because they don’t mark Ashfield as belonging to only one ethnic group.

- The general sentiment was that the softer colours are familiar to the Anglo-Celtic residents, especially the elderly but interviewees were equally pleased that they still kind of represent the Chinese while not excluding any of the other ethnic groups that Ashfield calls home.

Moreover, many seniors were resentful that the local newspaper reports that emerged subsequent to the meeting described above implied that their objections were simply racist.

**Ron:** When it was reported in the local paper, there was definitely a stance toward as if we had been anti-, as if we were being racist. The council and the local paper made out as if we were racist.

**Beverly:** Racist; it was definitely slanted that way. To me when I read it I thought it was very much slanted and that was not the conversation. Yes, it was interesting because there was no reporter at that meeting. It was one of the councillors, that’s where it came from. That’s why you know, that’s why you wouldn’t go any say anything to the council.

**Beryl:** You can’t communicate what you want in case it gets labelled racist. It’s just a feeling that you get. So people just shut off and simmer in silence, you know?

- For many of the particularly elderly in Ashfield, the radical erasure of Ashfield’s old urban landscape removes all those material markers or *évocateurs* of memory we all lay down throughout our lifetimes.

- It is here that the significance of their length of residence, their very localised lives and their health-induced inability to travel far offers some clues as to why the Anglo and other long term elderly of Ashfield feel such a sense of homely dissonance in the new Ashfield.

- The disappearance of familiar places and landmarks ruptures memories that have been laid down through real, physical, bodily, interactions with a place.
The changes in Ashfield’s shopping-scape, landmarks and general main-street change need to be managed with a degree of empathy for the longer term residents (Anglo and non-Anglo alike).

That does not preclude change or the introduction of new groups. Rather it suggests a response that understands that creating a home for newcomers to some extent means disrupting an environment familiar and homely to the longer term residents.

Difference is also more comfortable if residents feel there are multiple opportunities for belonging, experience and identification. Neighbouring suburb Burwood is as diverse as Ashfield and in particular has a large Middle Eastern and Asian population. The difference between Burwood and Ashfield is that Burwood’s diversity is fairly evenly represented in its street shopping.

Burwood we like. Burwood is more cosmopolitan. I mean I like different nationalities. And I like the mix. I feel there’s a much greater mix of nationalities in Burwood. And they’re more friendly, more positive, yes. You don’t feel isolated. You feel that anyone can fit in up at Burwood. Whereas in Ashfield, you feel quite isolated.
Positive stories about Ashfield’s Chinese shops

While the sentiments were overwhelmingly negative toward the new shopping-scape in Ashfield, there were a few particular shops that had established quite positive relationships with their non-Chinese clientele.

There are a few shops, such as the chemist shop and the Vietnamese bread shop that appear in the narratives of Ashfield’s elderly over and over again. The shopkeepers in these shops reportedly go out of their way to act as mediators and social links with their non-Asian customers and they are known to pass on cultural knowledge to Anglo elderly in particular which has a flow on effect. The following account from Betty is a good example. At 75, she has lived in Ashfield, indeed, in the same street, her whole life.

Betty: I will say a ni how (how are you), to them, to the Asian places. When it was gong xi fatt choy (Chinese New Year) in February, I had heard from Mary and Edward, the Chinese couple who run the chemist, about the little red bags they give in China, with money in it. And I knew the gold was popular. So I went to Tek (the $2 discount shop, also Chinese owned) and I got some little red bags, paper ones. And I got some gold foil paper, and I cut a couple of strips and I put a few dollars in and gave to Mary and Edward and the Chinese fellow who does my massage, and the Vietnamese lady in the bread shop.

Betty’s interaction with the chemist owner, her Chinese masseur and the Vietnamese lady in the bread-shop are such that cultural difference is experienced in a friendly, interactive way. She uses what she’s learnt from the Chinese pharmacists Mary and Edward about red packets and Chinese New Year to establish friendly relations in return in a way that produces forms of belonging across difference.

There were similar sentiments expressed toward a particular coffee shop in the food court of Ashfield mall, whose Chinese owners go out of their way to be particularly friendly with the Anglo-Celtic seniors, remembering their name, greeting them if they see them passing and so forth.
While there were unequivocally negative sentiments among research participants toward the changes in the Ashfield town centre, perceptions of interethnic neighbouring were more mixed with many offering more positive opinions about their culturally different neighbours.

Isolation & Ageing

Intercultural or otherwise, contemporary neighbouring practices have changed fundamentally in modern Australian suburbs for many reasons, but often to do with the fact that the ‘at home mum’ is an increasingly rare phenomena. In the Ashfield context, this is compounded by the language difficulties experienced by many of the new Chinese residents who often feel shy to make conversation or contact with their neighbours for fear of embarrassment over their lack of English.

- There was a clear feeling in many of my interviews that Ashfield’s seniors are experiencing a sense of closure, of being isolated, cut off, made an individual in a sea of strangers, rather than part of a network of people who responding openly to them in local encounters.

- The lack of what they expect of ‘community’ in a local suburb, at the shops, and with neighbours gives them a sense that their worlds have shrunk to the four walls of their home.

- Many of older Anglo-Celtic residents feel a real shyness about interacting with culturally different locals. Many of these elderly place great value on ‘good manners’ and feel quite anxious about not knowing the right thing to do when interacting with someone from a culturally different background, and express a wish not to offend.

- In other words, there was a real sense among many of my research participants that they felt they had no idea how to ‘do’ difference in an embodied sense.

These changes are experienced in very real ways by the elderly for whom neighbours may be the only point of human contact in a day. The elderly of course often rely on neighbourly relations in times of illness, loneliness or need, and many in my study were deeply anxious that they might fall ill, for example, and no one would notice.
Changes amongst neighbours

Norma, an Anglo working class woman in her late 60s and married to a Filipino man talks about how her friendships with neighbours have changed over the years.

Norma: When we moved into our street, we had a Dutch family this side, she was friendly, then we had Croats came. The other side we had Greek, and next to them were from the Philippines. Over the road were more Greeks, and Maltese. And we were all really friendly with each other. But they all moved away. Now, we’ve Chinese in most of the homes around us, who make no effort to get to know anybody. And we don’t know them either. I have tried. I went to introduce myself and I try to greet them up at the corner shop, but they’re sort of locked away all the time and I don’t know how to be friendly with them. They just don’t seem interested. So it’s really quite lonely now.

Norma’s neighbours are no doubt simply working exceptionally long hours, busy making a living outside the home with little time to get to know neighbours or learn English, and are probably embarrassed to speak with her because of their perceived lack of language skills. Yet in Norma’s mind, their lack of ‘neighbourly contact’ is simply connected to their ethnicity.

Language skills are another key factor inhibiting the development of neighbourly relationships.

Anne: We try to be friendly with the neighbours…. We try but they are not… Its more them that don’t… they, I think they’re frightened. Um… when I go to speak to the old chap upstairs, he’ll just go, ‘ho, ho’ … you know and he just wanders off. And I think that, you know, he doesn’t understand me, and he doesn’t want to be embarrassed. So I just don’t bother too much.

As Anne’s story indicates, often new non-English speaking neighbours feel shy about their lack of language skills and simply try to avoid neighbourly contact so as to avoid embarrassment.

Some residents reported a sense that Ashfield would eventually become a Chinese suburb and expressed feelings of decline, that their time had passed, their history in the suburb would be erased.

Roy: I’d say that in 20 years time, this area will be all Chinese. We’ve five flats in this block with Chinese, three are owned by Chinese and one of them comes and asks me, ” you want to sell Mr Smith, I’ve got a friend who wants to buy it.” They’ll build a community around themselves. Our time here has passed. We don’t really belong here anymore.
**Wider Social changes**

There are a number of broader societal changes that have an impact on the elderly in Ashfield. Collectively, these broader urban trends create a real sense of change fatigue among many elderly residents meaning they are less able to cope with the changes brought by the new migrant group.

- With relatively little support from extended family, many of Ashfield’s elderly find they are unable to maintain their homes and gardens. Consequently, about half of the participants in this study had moved into flats in the higher density parts of Ashfield.

- Neighbours in blocks of flats are more likely to be renters, represent a more transient population, and are more likely to be newer migrants, often without English language skills. Consequently developing sustained and supportive neighbourly relations presents a much greater challenge. Levels of isolation are often higher among such elderly residents.

- Elderly residents in both flats and houses have also experienced a greater turn over of neighbours due to the recent property boom. Many of the buyers in the last five years have been investors and rent their properties out.

- Consequently, a number of the elderly in this study have, in the space of ten years, gone from knowing most of the people in the street who were long term residents (Anglos as well as post-war migrants) of twenty or more years standing, to having more than half the homes in their street sold to investors.

- There are also broader societal changes around length of residence, from a tradition of lifetime homes to a contemporary average of five years home ownership.

- The rise of women in the workforce also means that most homes are now empty during the day presenting fewer opportunities for informal contact with neighbours. The elderly are often at home alone all day and feel particularly isolated in this new context.

- Reliance on cars mean fewer people walk around the neighbourhood. This translates into fewer opportunities to become familiar with those in your own street or on your regular walking route. Many elderly interviewees had friendships extending right along their streets in years past, whereas now most will only know neighbours directly adjoining their homes.

- There has also been a cultural shift from ‘front verandah’ sitting to backyard living producing a reduction in the opportunities for greeting neighbours.

- Corner shops have closed down throughout the suburb. Corner shops, where they still exist, provide an important point of social contact for elderly residents who appreciate not just the convenience, but the friendly relationships they are able to develop with corner shopkeepers.

- There is now a focus on the mall as town centre, while elderly still see the street as a prime site of belonging for the local suburb.

- The elderly use the mall, however malls are aesthetically generic. They do not give the same sense of locality, neighbourhood feeling, belonging, and place identity.
Some positive stories

- Against the narratives of closure and isolation reported earlier in the report, the study went looking for and found a number encounters that typify more hopeful relations.

- Usually these situations relied on some kind of ice breaker; sometimes that was an individual deliberately and bravely reaching out beyond difference, sometimes it was a certain social environment that unexpectedly connected those involved.

- What characterised these situations, a few of which I describe below, is that they often precipitated a flowering of exchange between the parties involved and beyond.

- Importantly, the stories about these moments seem to have become important talismans for a number of my interviewees, moments they report to show all is not lost in their multicultural neighbourhood, moments they narrated to me to demonstrate that the ‘other’ is ‘ok’ after all.
John’s story about the planter box being watered secretly by the elderly Chinese neighbour is typical of the type of narrative my elderly interviewees would report as an example of ‘good neighbourliness’ and in turn ‘good multiculturalism’ in Ashfield.

- They are usually stories of simple forms of reciprocity and neighbours showing a ‘little kindness’.

Esther’s report to me that ‘it is a tradition of Chinese to help older people’ was something I heard over and over again, and is one of those values shared cross-culturally, and no doubt one that is comforting to the elderly who feel de-valued and isolated in the contemporary world.
Gifts, both material and gifts of neighbourly ‘care’ as described in the case studies above, help to develop the emotional and interpersonal aspects of neighbourhood relationships.

- In complex culturally diverse cities, those living in close proximity are not likely to be constituted by ‘strong ties.’

- The vignettes recounted here demonstrate that relations of neighbourly care and reciprocity are undervalued and potentially offer real possibilities to build social capital in ethnically diverse communities.
Another theme to emerge during the project was the importance of certain non-ethno-specific forms of social space that facilitated togetherness in difference. For want of a better expression, we might call them ‘crossing places’. Crossing places are the kinds of spaces that ease intercultural encounters and relationships among those perhaps less comfortable with difference. Their success seems to lie in their non-place character, their in between-ness or their lack of identification with one group or another.

Clubs

Surprisingly, Ashfield’s numerous clubs proved to be fertile ground for intercultural friendships to develop. They provide a non-ethno-specific social context for cross-cultural familiarity to develop.

Ashfield has a high concentration of clubs, including the Ashfield and Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSLs, the Wests Leagues Club, and the Ashfield Catholic and Community Club. These five clubs form the single most common element in the social lives of Ashfield’s elderly residents from every ethnic group. Every single senior interviewed reported regular visits to these clubs several times a week. The main activity is participation in the raffles which are held most days of the week, followed by a cheap club meal, and for some, a few dollars on the poker machines.

Besides the shopping mall, these clubs are the most culturally diverse places in the local area. They have the highest levels of interethnic interaction and seem to provide the basis for otherwise unlikely friendships to emerge, particularly among the elderly. During the Sunday afternoon raffle at the Ashfield RSL you’ll find several large tables of youngish and older seniors each as culturally diverse as the next: commonly you will find several Chinese, Filipinas, Indians, Anglos, Polish and Italian at the same table each with their tickets spread in front of them and applauding one another when their number comes up. They’ll often call over a hello to people at other tables and the club staff know many of them by name. Those seniors interviewed say they have a regular weekly circuit across the five clubs and catch up with their friends at each place: Ashfield RSL on a Friday for the grocery raffle, Wests on Sunday for the Surf and Turf Raffle, and so on.
Mostly sentiments towards cultural difference were quite positive in the context of the club. There was however some significant resentment at the Chinese restaurant at the Ashfield RSL. The restaurant, owned and managed by a local Chinese businessman has a predominantly Chinese menu. The restaurant owner has contracts to bring in bus tours from mainland China. These Chinese tourists come through the RSL restaurant each day in significant numbers (four or five busloads per day) reportedly making it difficult for local residents, to find seating. There is also a large Chinese language banner on the outside of the restaurant.

Esther and multicultural club friends

In her 80s, Esther has lived in area since 1969. A feisty, working class lady, she grew up on a dairy farm in Queensland then moved to Sydney where her husband and she owned the local milk run for many years. She’s often seen around Ashfield with her milk crate on a trolley which she uses to cart groceries and booty collected at club raffles. Here, she speaks about the newly Chinese nature of Ashfield shops and how her experience in local clubs has helped her feel comfortable with the changes around her:

**Esther:** It doesn’t worry me at all. I sometimes say you’d think you’re in China weren’t you. You sit at the bus stop... but it doesn’t worry me at all. I suppose you know, I have friends, from different multicultural at the club. Chinese, Philippines, Polish, its a real mixture at the club. We meet at the club every week... We made friends – just seeing regular faces... We mainly just see each other at the club, we meet for the Raffles and free concerts. But a couple of them I see outside.

So I think I didn’t notice the changes because of that. I mainly go to Wests, and mostly Chinese there of course. And that's where I socialise. So the changes in the suburb didn’t bother me, I didn’t notice them really.

Esther’s narrative shows how the simple fact of regular togetherness, how involvement in an activity enjoyed by all groups in a place all participants comfortably inhabit, can facilitate friendships across difference which in turn can impact on their broader feelings of belonging vis a vis diversity in the local area.
Special events

Dancing at the Ashfield Seniors Fair

Sometimes there are those wonderful moments that unexpectedly produce intercultural connections. During my ethnography I attended the council’s annual Ashfield Seniors Spring Fair, organised by the aged and disability officer. The fair was held in the Ashfield Town Hall and all the seniors groups—Anglo as well as all the ethnic seniors organisations—were invited to set up a stall to raise funds for their respective groups. They were selling the usual array of jams, crafts, home grown pot plants, knitted and crotched things. The Greek and polish ladies were selling cultural handicrafts and second hand items and the Chinese stalls were selling imported trinkets of the kind you might find at markets the world over. The fair ran for the whole day, the crowd ebbing and flowing in size, from the bustle of the morning rush to the quieter flow of the thin afternoon crowd. Over the day the various ladies visited one another’s stalls to inspect their respective wares and eventually little conversations emerged across the room between the various stall holders of different cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the council had hired a Greek piano accordion player for the day and he was wandering around the room playing favourite tunes to create a bit of atmosphere and to try to attract passers by in from the street outside. At one point toward the end of the day when the crowd had all but gone, the accordion player began to play the Zorba—or some variation of it—in front of the Greek women’s stall. They jumped up, linked arms and began to dance in the middle of the hall. The Anglo ladies were very much enjoying this, clapping along to the familiar yet foreign tune, the Polish ladies joined the dance, then unexpectedly, the Chinese ladies got up and joined in, some dancing, some clapping, and before long all the different groups were on their feet and clapping along. The accordion player kept playing different songs, from Greek tunes to Waltzing Matilda which everyone sang along to. It was magical and seemed to produce this space of exchange between mutually shy and suspicious seniors – who by the end of the day were friendly with one another—and parted with genuine joy.

- What worked about this event was the fact that it was a non-ethno-specific space, the participants were all there in support of their individual groups yet sharing a common fundraising cause.
- The music had ethnic roots yet joyfully translated across a myriad of ethnic lines, and the participants were spurred through this joy to connect across their differences.
- It wasn’t a space which outwardly celebrated multiculturalism, the Anglo seniors were not expected to ‘celebrate multiculturalism’.
- It simply represented a day where those from different backgrounds could become spontaneously familiar with one another.
Another important context for local intercultural learning is the Exodus foundation in the Ashfield Uniting Church on Liverpool Road. Providing meals for the marginalised and homeless, the Exodus soup kitchen is staffed by church volunteers. Each Saturday a different religious and/or ethnic group come in to assist the church volunteers provide this service. The Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu communities are regular participants. Exodus provides a solid context for intercultural contact where both sides are working for a common cause. Volunteers are able to meet and get to know one another and spend the day together.

Ruby: You’re not conscious of them. I realised that quite a lot of the volunteers, and people that come and that, have actually got accents, but you’re not conscious of where they come from. Because when you’re there you have a common interest, you’re achieving a common end. So there’s no demarcation that you’re this and you’re that. We’ve got people from all nationalities there. And the Chinese couple that we have, they mix with Chinese people and they speak Chinese at home, but they go out of their way to mix outside as well.

However not all attempts at ‘togetherness-in-difference’ work. A recent multicultural International Women’s Day event came up a number of times in the interviews—with Anglo as well as post-war migrant women—as an occasion where the cross-cultural dimension caused more resentment than anything else. In this instance, the event was organised by one ethnic group, and those other groups invited felt slightly marginalised, shy and were not happy at the culturally specific theme, food and entertainment. The key message here then is that intercultural events need to be carefully planned and managed, and where appropriate, not identified with a particular ethnic group.

Rose: I think its only natural that people from other countries want to join together and group together. Um because um, we’ve tried in seniors week at the town hall, to incorporate the different groups. Even last year, for instance the English entertainer just stopped, and said, well when you’re finished talking. Because if there’s an English entertainer, the Chinese people just talk, very loudly across the room. And you find the others tend to, when it’s the Chinese entertainer, they sit there, try to sit through it politely and quietly. But there’s not this half way. It’s a cultural difference. So its easier actually then to have Chinese entertainment, English entertainment, separately. Don’t cause problems by having them together.
Perceptions of Multiculturalism through Ashfield

Emerging from these very local experiences of rapid neighbourhood change brought about by a new migrant group, were some more general perceptions and feelings about multiculturalism locally and nationally.

Feelings about reciprocity

Perhaps the strongest and most consistent sentiment to emerge among the Anglo-Celtic elderly was the perception that multiculturalism at the local level was a one way process of change.

- The Anglo-Celtic elderly felt that they were expected to do all the accommodating, both to change personally, and accept a wholesale change in their familiar neighbourhood landscape.

- They felt that the organisations (community centres, meals-on-wheels, seniors groups and the like) they belonged to were expected to provide translations to be accessible to the new non-English speaking migrants. And they were aware of the extent to which the council provides similar services.

- They felt that in return, the new migrants and the council should accept their own (Anglo-Celtic) cultural practices and beliefs, and that it was not racist of them to want English language signage and shop assistants able to speak English as well as Chinese.

**Margaret:** I think I suppose, and a lot of our friends feel this way. Is that we feel that we’re offering the hand of friendship and trying as hard as we can to incorporate all nationalities. But we feel very much that its being rejected. That there’s not a little half way pattern emerging. And we feel, you know some of those shops have been there for years. many of those shops have been here for a long while so its not as if its hard for them to get something translated.
Perceptions about ‘special treatment’ from local government

Some also perceived that the council has a ‘softly, softly’ approach when it comes to the new shopkeepers along Liverpool road and that council should apply the rules fairly and without prejudice, regardless of cultural background. Some felt that the council perhaps feared being perceived as unfriendly to cultural difference if it enforced regulations around signage, cleanliness, window posters, shop style and so forth.

Madge (former Ashfield shopkeeper): Well, everybody complains that the footpaths are filthy and mainly because of the cultural differences in that, when you clean your shop, there is a cultural difference of just hosing the floor and just sweeping the grease onto the footpath. So outside the shop you’ll see a mark, a fan shaped mark onto the footpath. You’ll see a fan-shaped mark of grease on the footpath. Its been bought up at council that the window’s are completely covered with signage or paper, posters or whatever. And the council has said that there is nothing that can be done about it. Its these sort of things that people feel, and its become very dirty, we feel that the area has become very very dirty. And that really upsets them. You know, that the council seems to have one rule for us, and another for the Chinese shops.

Fears about expressing feelings for fear of being labelled ‘racist’

Related to the above—and to the story reported earlier about the proposals to Ashfield’s new colour scheme (see page 23)—most interviewees felt that they had no where to turn to complain about these issues for fear of being labelled racist.

- I had a great deal of difficulty in recruiting participants for the study, typically receiving comments such as ‘I’ll just sound racist’, or ‘I hate it here and you just wouldn’t like what I have to say’.

- There is a general level of cynicism and suspicion in discussing these matters with council.

- There is clearly a need for open dialogue between residents and council on these matters, and a need for some kind of space where representatives of various cultural groups can discuss the matter of ‘place-sharing’ in a safe, non-racist manner.

- At present, these real feelings are left to fester untended, producing much more racist responses that would otherwise be the case.

- The research in this area suggests that constructive and supportive inter-cultural dialogue between residents on sensitive cross-cultural matters (with council mediating) produces much more positive outcomes than the ‘hands-off’ approach, characterised by fearful silence among those in government, and a festering resentment among residents.
Wishes on both sides for a new form of multiculturalism

- All sides in this study expressed a firm support for multiculturalism, as long as it encompassed both cultural maintenance, and reciprocity and gestures of friendship across difference.

- The Chinese participants in the study, including official community workers were extremely keen to see council initiatives to develop more inter-ethnic contact and more positive relations.

- They responded very positively and constructively to the results of this study and were empathetic to the difficulties faced by the Anglo-Celtic elderly.

- The Chinese participants understood that the very things that bring them to Ashfield—language, familiar faces and the availability of culturally suitable products—were also things that Anglo-Elderly needed on their side to maintain a sense of homeliness.

- There was a real recognition among all participants that the goal of multiculturalism in Ashfield was to achieve a sense of place that allowed multiple forms of belonging, and was accessible and enjoyable to all cultural groups in the area.
Section Three – Conclusions & Recommendations

Summary of Key Findings

General Findings

- Broader societal exclusion and marginalisation of the elderly was a significant causal factor in negative sentiments toward changes in the local area brought by rapid recent migration.

- The challenges of ageing made coping with urban change much more difficult to cope with.

- There was a direct link between the level of physical mobility (especially driving) and the levels of unhappiness and feelings of exclusion and displacement. The more mobile simply went elsewhere.

- There were overwhelming feelings of resentment, disorientation, and exclusion experienced by Anglo-Celtic Seniors.

- There is a clear feeling among them that their memories and ‘landscape of belonging’ are being erased.

- Similar levels of unhappiness were found among long-term non-Anglo residents of various backgrounds, especially post-war migrants of Polish, Italian, Greek and also longer-term Indian residents.

- It is therefore not simply an ‘Anglo vs Newcomers’ issue. Many of the post-war migrants expressed distress that just as they had finally begun to feel a real sense of home and belonging locally, they have become (in their minds) completely alienated again.

- Feeling that ‘celebrating multiculturalism’ locally basically represented a devaluing of their belonging and contribution to the area, and disregarded the difficulties they faced in everyday contexts.

- A sense that people felt it was ‘unsafe’ to voice their discomfort publicly for fear of being labelled racist.

- Many of the findings represent low levels of what I term ‘interethnic social capital’.
Anxiety centred on feelings of exclusion in the Ashfield shopping area

- Resentment around proliferation of Chinese language signs without translation.
- Particularly so in regard to street or eye-level signage (menus, posters and the like)
- Discomfort with cultural differences around manners and shopkeeper/customer interactions.
- Dominance of one cultural group on the local shopping street. Much less anxiety about ‘cosmopolitan’ places such as Burwood.
- For a large percentage of the women interviewed, the local shops was their main point of social contact during the week and thus a sense of alienation an isolation develops when shops are no longer accessible.
- Although Ashfield Mall is popular, it’s not a ‘place of belonging’ in the way that street-shopping is. People felt street-shopping represents the identity of a place and a more personal form of local belonging.
- A sense that negotiating everyday life has simply become harder.
- A sense of isolation and exhaustion among many long-term elderly residents stemming from the changes.

There were more complex feelings around neighbourly relations

- Majority feel isolated and perceive a lack of friendly, supportive neighbourly relations.
- However those participants whose new neighbours had English language skills had much more positive sentiments toward them and were more likely to have a sense of neighbourly connection.
- Positive neighbourly relationships tended to be those who had found some way to ‘break the ice’ and establish relationships with new neighbours. Tended to be more middle class individuals, were still mobile, or attended Bill Crews’ Uniting Church.
- The most sustained relationships with (and positive perceptions toward) Chinese neighbours were those characterised by reciprocity and care, but simple, regular greetings were almost as important.
Recommendations

1. Recognise the diverse nature of Ashfield and recognise the role of Ashfield town centre as a space of belonging for all resident groups.

2. View multiculturalism in Ashfield not just in terms of providing services to resident ethnic communities. Multiculturalism should be managed with reference to the idea of ‘place-sharing’.

3. Intercommunal relations, learning and dialogue should form an absolutely central aspect of council’s multicultural planning and service provision.

4. Shopkeepers should be viewed as the front line interface between the locality and local residents. Council should take an active role in enhancing their role in local community building (within and between cultural groups).

5. Priority should be given to building inter-ethnic social capital: trust, reciprocity, contact, civic participation and supportive neighbourhood relationships. (See Appendix 1 on Social Capital)

6. Priority should be given to town-centre revitalisation initiatives, especially those that create street level participation amongst all residents. Initiatives might include street fairs; markets; a public art program along Liverpool Road (Marrickville is a good example here); more gathering places and general aesthetic improvements.
Recommendations for Future Research

1. RESEARCH INTO STRATEGIES TO BUILD INTERETHNIC SOCIAL CAPITAL.

- Action research into new models and trends for interethnic integration or harmony projects at the local government level is recommended. Australia has the chance to lead the way here. The United Kingdom, Europe and Canada are much further advanced in developing grounded local solutions and strategies for building what I term ‘inter-ethnic social capital’.

- There is a need for research into models suitable for the Australian context. This could be achieved through action research where strategies are proposed then piloted and assessed by a ‘lighthouse’ council such as Ashfield that can serve as a national role model.

- It would include proposals for innovative local events and initiatives, including strategies to enhance intercultural relationships and informal contact; intercultural neighbouring; intercultural trust and learning, and structures to develop participatory conflict resolution.

- As Contact Zones was conducted primarily among Anglo-Celtic seniors, there is a need for further study of other resident ethnic groups, particularly Chinese, Indian, Greek, Italian, and Filipino communities.

- A pilot study using focus groups for idea gathering is suggested, leading into a larger scale action research project.

2. RESEARCH INTO ‘WHOLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT’ SYSTEMS, SERVICE DELIVERY AND PLANNING IN RELATION TO THE NOTION OF ‘PLACE-SHARING’ IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE SETTINGS.

- During informal discussions, some council staff indicated a sense of frustration and concern that they were ill equipped to deal with the complex and often competing demands from their diverse constituency.

- It become apparent during the course of this study that council structures, planning processes, modes of service delivery and forms of community consultation and dialogue could benefit from a thorough assessment in terms of cultural diversity and the challenges of ‘place-sharing’.

- For example there appeared to be few channels through which competing claims around place, and differing cultural needs could be discussed and dealt with in a non-confrontational, supportive and constructive manner.
Appendix 1:

Social Capital Definition

This section outlines the requirements for social capital and the core approaches to it. The section has been drawn from ‘The Social Audit Cookbook: recipes for auditing the way we connect’ by Eva Cox, University of Technology, Sydney. Another useful background document on the topic is ‘Social Capital Norms, Networks and Practices: A critical Evaluation’, by Roger Patulny, Social Policy Research Centre Discussion Paper No. 134, June 2004.

Requirements for Social Capital

- **Interest**: People show attention to what is going on outside their immediate circle, can recognise others’ needs and express respect for diversity of views and customs.

- **Participation**: There is engagement and interest in working collectively for common purposes.

- **Trust in people**: People are willing to trust others, whether familiar or unfamiliar

- **Trust in institutions**: People are prepared to work for change within the democratic process of government.

- **Capacity to resolve conflict civilly**: People feel comfortable exploring and accepting the different and new.

Characteristics of low level social capital

- Obvious levels of overt conflict without resolution.
- Easy classification of unfamiliar people as ‘others’.
- Obvious levels of anger in particular groups based on perceptions of unfairness or feeling threatened.
- Hostility toward or scape-goating of particular groups.
- Lack of civic pride.
- Lack of interest in or cynicism toward civic initiatives.
- Little networking at local level with neighbours, few local shops, few connections with others and low use of public places and streets.
- Failure of community activities due to lack of support and participation.
- High levels of physical security (bars, alarms etc), exaggerated fear of crime.
- Low levels of use of public spaces, perceived high risks.
- Highly stratified communities with little or no mixing of sub-groups.
Bonding, Bridging & Linking: Different forms of Social Capital

- **Bonding social capital** is found in the strong links between familiairs. Often geographically based community, relatively homogeneous. The links may be fairly thick, often very supportive and nurturing for families.

- **Bridging social capital** is found in the less intense relationships we have with others who are not part of our more intimate circles. This involves relationships with groups who are not like us or maybe just knot known to us. Such relationships might be with different groups within a geographic area, or with groups in different areas but whose interests and activities overlap.

- **Linking** – involves groups interacting with each other and with institutions such as government and other providers of resources. Linking creates the potential for them all to work together effectively.

- In some cases, networks of people may operate to deliver privileges for their members. It is possible to deliberately or inadvertently injure others by excluding them from a range of experiences and networks that could deliver benefits. These may be seen as types of bonded social capital which fail to bridge, working on exclusion rather than inclusion.