

A Plastic Cube or a Cultural Symbol?: Ethnography of Melbourne Milk Crates

Melbourne, Victoria is a city of true character, intriguing to both visitors and native alike. Past tourism slogans have boasted “It’s Easy to Lose Yourself in Melbourne,” most appropriate for this city known for its hidden laneways. Cities around the world have left the space in-between buildings to be garbage littered, unlit and only inviting to those looking for trouble. The attractive laneways of Melbourne set this metropolitan area apart. The laneways are a treasure chest of bars, cafés and restaurants. What is the most interesting, however, is the use of milk crates in these laneways. The simple plastic storage crates are creatively used at restaurants and cafés as seating. In the laneways, the crates are used innovatively for a variety of purposes. For example, a street performer uses a stack of blue and green crates for his amp stand. Also, wooden squares are nailed into the wall as a table, with crates placed underneath (Appendix A). In general, abandoned crates lie near the walls, inviting to any Melbournian looking for a place to take a cigarette break, make a phone call or eat their lunch (Appendix B). I explore how these milk crates came into popular everyday use and how their presence is significant to the Melbourne laneway lifestyle.

In Melbourne, as I walked through the city streets and into laneways, I noticed the popular use of these milk crates. Immediately, they caught my eye and I became curious of their purpose. Specifically, I wondered why all types of people were using crates as furniture. I interviewed everyday people on the streets asking what they thought of the crates and if they used them. I interviewed various café owners about their use of crates as furniture or décor for their business. I observed the types of people using crates as furniture and how they interacted with each other. In both observing and interviewing, notes were recorded. I attempted to draw conclusions from the patterns observed and interviews conducted. Upon returning to Sydney, I conducted further secondary research about the laneway culture. I attempted to discover the origin of milk crates in the city streets and how their use has

evolved. In particular, I continued my research of cafés and restaurants using crates as décor. I found multiple reviews of Melbourne cafés that specifically mentioned their use of crates as a positive aspect. I read Australian news articles and blog posts about the versatile use of milk crates – including a past example of unique crate street art in Melbourne. This research, combined with my first-hand observations, allowed me to gain a better understanding of this trend and how it fits into the laneway culture of Melbourne.

All of my fieldwork was conducted in the city of Melbourne, specifically in the laneways. Two laneways I spent most of my time on were DeGraves Street and Centre Place Lane. These laneways are across from one another off of Flinders Lane. Centre Place Lane opens up in two directions: from the Centre Place Shopping Center (Appendix C) or from Flinders Lane under the “Centre Place” archway (Appendix D). The Shopping Centre opens up to the laneway and initially contrasts the mall with an abundance of graffiti to the right side, crates everywhere and a street performer playing the keyboard (Appendix E). The keyboard player was sitting on a crate and using another crate as a stand for his coffee. Looking down the alley, it is lined on both sides with shops, cafés and bars (Appendix F). There are crepes, soups and coffees at every turn. Due to the confined space in the laneway, every establishment uses tiny tables and chairs as seating, if not milk crates. I continued down Centre Place Laneway to Flinders Lane where across the street is the opening of Degraves Street. Degraves atmosphere is still true to the laneway feel – the sound of chatter and laughter bounces off the walls on either side in sight quarters as you pass dozens of delicious smells and different types of people (Appendix G). However, Degraves was a bit more upscale in terms of seating and menu, with little presence of milk crates at all. I got the inkling that the crates were not simply random and pointless. I decided to interview customers and staff at both laneway cafés and everyday street cafés to get a better understanding of the milk crate-seating craze.

Based on what I learned from Melbourne café goers and workers, the milk crates came about due to a combination of the cheapness, the aesthetics and have become a quirk of the laneway lifestyle. While stopping into Jungle Juice Bar on Centre Place, I spoke to a barista Natasha about the origin of the crates. The Juice Bar is a typical laneway establishment - quaint and tiny café tucked inside the depths of the cluttered and hectic alley. She informed me that a lot of the cafés in the Melbourne Central Business District opened in the 1990s wherever they could. Typically, it was confined spaces around the high-rise and business buildings. Young people took over and wanted to “make it their own, not only a business district.” The thing about milk crates that was so attractive to the small spaces was the storability. They are convenient to stack for storage, and easy to find on the streets after a milk delivery has been made in the early morning hours. Natasha informed me that in her mind, Rays on Brunswick is the original crate-utilizing café. I went there to find wooden boxes taking their place. Josh, an employee there, said the CBD laneway cafés began a recycling initiative in the 1990s and today most of the cafés maintain that theme. Milk crates were a part of that movement because they are reusable and free. I asked the simple question “Why milk crates as furniture?” to people on the streets all afternoon. From the most elaborate answers to the quickest comments, the consensus was clear – the best part is they are free.

The milk crates relate to the Melbourne café and laneway culture. A Sensory Lab employee, a café outside of the laneways on Little Collins Street, described Melbourne cafés ongoing trend as having a “grungy low-fi look that is industrial, cheap but also at the same time aesthetic.” This young barista echoed my initial thoughts on Melbourne as a city – “when I first moved here, I was shocked to see large office buildings on one side and alleyways with coffee shops and milk crates at the next turn.” It is extremely contrasting. He had some disdain about my questions involving laneway cafés because Sensory Lab is on a

regular city street. He said, "Living in Melbourne, I know that just because a café is not in an alleyway doesn't mean it's not just as good." Another barista on Centre Place at Aix Cafe Creperie Salon described the use of crates as "absolutely fantastic."

Off of Little Bourke, there are many laneways including Somerset Place. This laneway is not as developed as Centre Place or DeGraves. In fact, when you look down the laneway you may not see much activity or notice that The Little Mule café is open and brewing. However, what I did notice was a few individuals sitting on milk crates so I decided to walk that way. That is when I found this café tucked in the side of the building and spoke to Hue, a barista there. He said the crates are vital to the café's business. Although they do not technically use the crates as part of their décor, the crates are in the laneways incase people want to sit there. It is "really handy" because the café doesn't have permits for outdoor seating but if people want to sit outside to enjoy their coffee or sandwich they can. Anyone can sit there, "as long as they are happy and comfortable sitting on them" and it is a "way around the law". Overall, sitting on the milk crates allows individuals to literally take a seat and watch the laneway world around them; "you are faced with the absolute delight of Melbourne's creative population" (Longo).

Besides seating, milk crates are used in Melbourne in a variety of creative ways. A shop keeper in his thirties summed up the potential diverse uses of this plastic square when he described it as "one of the great design icons of the 21st century." To a student like myself, who is simply visiting Melbourne for the first time, that may seem to be an exaggerated statement about a crate. However, as I researched these crates as seating, I found cafés and everyday people adore them because of their limitless utility. The crates used to be slightly larger to organize 12-inch vinyl records. One café uses them as planters for herbs on their roof. Some use them to store milk in the refrigerators, to hold magazines and books or for general shelving. Speaking to Melbourne college students, I learned they are frequently used

as laundry baskets, TV stands and bicycle baskets. There are various Australian blogs idolizing the milk crate such as 101UseForAMilkCrate.com. There is even some famous street art made out of milk crates that appeared in Melbourne in 2007. Only a few people I spoke to knew about the so-called “crate man,” a figure resembling a giant lego man or robot made completely of stacked crates. He has a yellow body, a green shirt, red pants and grey shoes. The most impressive and known version of crate man was in Victoria Park on a sound barrier wall (Appendix H). There he was shown scaling the wall in a sequence of different poses. Others appeared and disappeared around the city, and each was made with more than 150 crates. Yet, the original use of the crate as a seat has been around for so long in this city that one café goer said they have seen them “forever [...] people use them with cushions even but it’s something natural to sit on when you want to smoke a cigarette or drink a coffee.”

The few contrasting views of the crate seating are best exemplified in speaking with café goers in the St. Kilda neighborhood of Melbourne. St. Kilda wildly contrasts with the laneway vibe with upscale restaurants lined along neat sidewalks facing the Yarra River. One café had crates just in case people wanted to sit on them but it was “not recommended.” The barista described them as not very comfortable and a trend that will fade. Similarly, Sydney has not caught onto the milk crate movement that Melbourne holds most high. One male in his mid-twenties I spoke with on Centre Place boasted, laughing, “maybe because Melbourne is better.” This goes back to the idea that the crate seating matches the laneway’s aesthetics - a cluttered array of restaurants, shops, cafés, graffiti-covered walls - that Sydney lacks. In an article titled *Melbourne's love affair with lanes*, Freeman-Greene (2005) echoes the Australian city rivalry. The laneways in Melbourne “have an intimacy, a palpable history” that “you won't find amid northern skyscrapers and harbour panoramas” referring to cities like Sydney. The lanes allow Melbournians to have a new outlook on their city literally,

through the “arse-end of building [...]; bits of towers looming above brick walls.” It is clear not every resident of Melbourne is keen on using milk crates as seating, and other cities have not caught onto the trend. Still, these crates can be found all over the streets of Melbourne, proving the majority of people and café-owners continue to enjoy their look and use.

What is most interesting culturally about the use of milk crates is that they are widely accepted in the city by various groups of people. My observations included many businessmen and women taking their lunch break on a crate, at a café or even in a laneway not associated with a café. Some individuals in their mid-twenties and thirties smoked cigarettes and chatted (Appendix I). Many individuals fit the young hipster profile but equally as often, many did not. Most Melbournians on crates did not fit a particular profile at all. The barista at Creperie Salon on Centre Place shared with me his view – “People who have a slightly broader understanding of the world we live in and aren’t self-centered won’t have reservations about sitting on anything that supports their weight.” People from all walks of life continue to pay visit to the laneways and embrace the use of crates as a part of the experience.

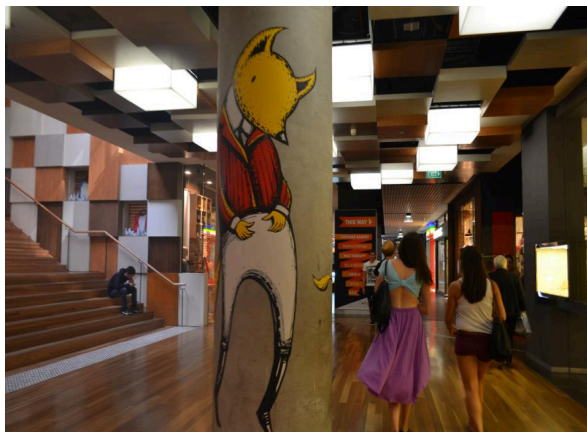
Melbourne is proud of its unique laneway culture. While other cities around the world boast about their skyscrapers, large parks and complex architecture, Melbourne embraces the quirky graffiti alleys as a part of its identity. It is quite possible that the laneways have a reciprocal relationship with the people of the city – the people have shaped the laneways into what they are today, and the laneway environment has impacted the Melbournian mentality. If you are ever in Melbourne, do not hesitate to take a seat on a plastic milk crate. It is guaranteed you will blend in with the locals.

Appendix A:

Myself sitting on a crate at a random table on Centre Place (Photo by a friend)

Appendix B:

Various miscellaneous crates on the sidewalk (Photo by me)

Appendix C:

The up-scale Centre Place Shopping Centre, looking towards the entrance to Centre Place Lane (Photo by me)

Appendix D:



The Centre Place archway entrance
(Photo by me)

Appendix E:



Graffiti and crates in the less commercial side of Centre Place
(Photo by a friend)

Appendix F:

Centre Place lined with cafés, restaurants and shops. Locals sitting outside on small tables and crates (Photo by me)

Appendix G:

Degraes Lane shops (Photo by me)

Appendix H:



Crate street art (Photo by Jason South, The Age)

Appendix I:



Young women talking while sitting on crates (Photo by me)

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