

**Felton, Emma**, Queensland University of Technology, Australia

**Living with Strangers: Public Space and the Ethics of Civility**

A defining characteristic of city life is that it's a place where we live among strangers, where we meet with and brush up against the "other" (Barthes 1986). It's become a familiar refrain to say that now for the first time in history, the majority of the world's population live in cities – increasingly amongst people of ethnic, cultural and social diversity. The public realm is where we encounter strangers; it is where the city's social life is played out. Vital to the social and democratic life of a city, the public realm shapes the types of interactions we have, the choices we make about where to go, where we feel safe and where we feel unwelcome. A site and source of power, public social space is also the arena for conflicts and turf wars, an inevitable part of urban living. As urbanisation continues to grow, the idea of the public realm as a sort of "civic school" where citizens can experience democratic values of tolerance and equality (Gleeson 2006) raises questions about the ways in which civil ethics and social responsibility might be cultivated in this sphere.

A growing awareness of the pressures of environmental sustainability in our urban habitats should not overlook the role that social sustainability plays in creating democratic, vibrant and harmonious places. This paper is based on a study of the small but rapidly developing city of Brisbane, Australia, to consider the ways in which the effective development of the public realm requires a focus on sociality and the emotional life of urban citizens.