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Melbourne’s ‘Third World-looking’ architecture

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Travelling around the Western Ring Road through Ardeer in Melbourne’s north-west, one of the most prominent landmarks is the massive white dome of the Cypriot Turkish Mosque and Community Centre, an exotic apparition in a landscape of overpasses, warehouses and megastores. On the other edge of Melbourne, near the shooting range and cattle corrals of Carrum Downs, the shimmering towers of the Shri Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple rise out of the surrounding farmland. And if you want to see a concentration of Melbourne’s most culturally radical public architecture, take a trip down Springvale Road, Springvale. As you motor along you’ll pass the elaborate gates of the Hoa Nghiem Vietnamese Buddhist temple, the guardian figures of the Khmer Buddhist Centre of Victoria, the semi-completed mass of the Bright Moon Buddhist Society’s new temple, and behind it, the golden finials of Wat Buddharangsri.

The buildings illustrated in this chapter show only some of the many ways in which Melbourne’s multicultural society is embodied in architecture. A survey I conducted in 2002 noted over one hundred examples, both alterations and additions to existing buildings and completely new constructions. These had been undertaken by over fifty distinct ethnic groups and forty different religious groups in Melbourne, and included places of worship, community centres, ethnically based museums and sporting and social clubs. Apart from revealing a wide variety of building types and styles the survey indicated the surprising extent to which Melbourne’s cultural diversity was reflected in its architecture. How many people would be aware, for instance, that within Melbourne’s metropolitan area are twenty-eight Buddhist temples and nineteen mosques? These buildings provide a glimpse of aspects of life in an Australian city that few people are aware of outside their particular users. In some cases the spaces and forms of these buildings are of unfamiliar beauty.

It is well known that over the past thirty years there have been waves of migration to Australia, involving the settlement of communities of a great diversity of cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Melbourne has become identified with its diversity of cultures to the point where ‘multicultural Melbourne’ has become a slogan for tourism and general promotion. In some areas Melbourne’s multiplicity of culture is readily apparent, demonstrated by its wide variety of ethnic restaurants, the range of music available in its bars and cafes, and frequent public celebrations and festivals. Most of Melbourne’s population are also aware of areas of ‘ethnic’
concentration, in particular shopping districts such as Little Bourke Street in the CBD, Victoria Street in Richmond and Sydney Road in Brunswick. However, given the extent to which cultural diversity is intrinsic to Melbourne’s self-image, it is surprising that a glance through architectural publications—whether glossy magazines or professional journals—reveals a general absence of culturally specific buildings. As these images show, a trip through suburban Melbourne reveals that there is a great deal of such building going on. The physical nature of the city is being affected by the diversity of cultures that inhabit it.

This leads to a number of questions. Why is there a discrepancy between representation and reality, and how might the architectural character of Melbourne be reconceived in the consideration of this ‘other’ building? In its original ‘homeland’ a newly constructed traditional building might be applauded as evidence of the maintenance of local culture. It might even be a tourist attraction. So does the same apply here? If a Melbourne Indian restaurant can be recognised as ‘authentic’, what about a local Hindu temple? What if the architectural identity of the city was to be seen as the combined effects of all the various cultural relations taking place here, not just the ones selected by Architecture Australia or ‘Domain’?

The location of many of these buildings gives a clue to the invisibility of multicultural architecture. Another statistic that arose out of my building survey was that of the newly constructed buildings some seventy-four per cent are on marginal land, either industrial or fringe-rural locations, compared to fourteen per cent of the adaptations and alterations to existing buildings. Finding many of them involved visiting the furthest edges of Melbourne, driving through industrial estates and remnant farmland. Such marginal locations suggest that while Melbourne’s multicultural image is justified, its character is shifting. As noted earlier, much of the city’s cultural character has been derived from its centre and inner suburbs, areas in which post-war immigrants settled and, armed with superior coffee, changed the wowser image of the city. The abandonment and later reinvigoration of the city’s inner urban areas has been much studied, and various social and infrastructural factors have been cited as causes. Many of Melbourne’s inner suburbs were largely working class up until the 1970s, a characteristic embodied in the modest size and close proximity of their residences. Both the status of the occupants and the state of the building stock rendered these areas unattractive to those with greater societal and material aspirations. The
reclamation of the inner suburbs, and their more recent championing as examples of Melbourne’s ‘urban character’ have meant that increasing value has been attributed to the inner city as physical evidence of the city’s ‘heritage’. However, it has been suggested that the present trend towards renovating and inhabiting Victorian-era building stock in Melbourne’s inner suburbs was largely instigated by southern European immigrants, who occupied deteriorated building stock in areas unvalued by the dominant society of the time. The prevalent governmental attitude was then disposed towards ‘slum clearance’, the demolition of extant building stock in the inner suburbs of Melbourne in favour of ‘clean and modern’ high-rise flats. Southern European immigrants, due to economic circumstances and their less prejudiced attitudes towards ‘old’ buildings, occupied, refitted and adapted them to suit contemporary life. This practical demonstration of the possibilities of urban renewal has been noted as a factor in the increasing numbers of the majority Anglo-Celtic population to rethink their pejorative attitudes towards these areas.

In any case, since the 1970s there has been a reversal of the flight from the inner city and today these areas have become more generally desirable. With the reinvigoration of suburbs close to the centre of the city from the 1970s onwards, starting with Carlton and moving through Prahran, Fitzroy, Richmond and other areas, the inner suburbs became identified with a distinctively local yet cosmopolitan culture, where the assumed blandness and homogeneity of the Melbourne metropolitan mass was replaced by bohemian urbanity.

While the beginnings of the city’s multicultural identity might have been in inner suburbs, these areas are arguably becoming less culturally diverse. The second and third generations of migrants who revived these areas have dispersed, and suburbs such as Richmond and Carlton have become gentrified. But this does not mean that the multiplicity of Melbourne’s cultures has vanished. As a glance at Melbourne’s current demography reveals, outer suburbs such as Springvale, Box Hill, Broadmeadows or St Albans vigorously maintain the multicultural vitality of the city. However these areas are not (yet) considered to be fashionably bohemian. As might be gleaned from a scan of Melbourne’s real estate prices, the fringes of the city contain its least desirable land, ignored by both tourist literature and city polemics. While this is not to say that all of Melbourne’s recent migrants are in such locations (many south-east and east Asian settlers live in
Photos by David Beynon

Image 1: Sign, Wat Buddharangsí (Cambodian Buddhist Association Temple and Community Centre), Springvale South / Kibris Turk Islam Dernegi Victoria (Cypriot Turkish Islamic Mosque and Community Centre), Ardeer / Bright Moon Buddhist Temple (Wat Buddharangsí in background), Springvale South / Albanian Sahit Islamic Society Mosque, Dandenong / United Islamic Cultural Centre of Australia, Noble Park / St Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Church, Preston / Sign to Shri Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple, Carrum Downs / Reservoir Mosque, Reservoir / Springvale Road outside Hoa Nghiem Temple, Springvale South / Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, Reservoir / Cambodian Association of Victoria, Springvale / Sign, Eastern Chinese Baptist Church, Rowville / Seventh-Day Adventist Asian Church, Forest Hill / Hoa Nghiem Temple (Vietnamese Buddhist Association of South East Melbourne), Springvale South / Sri Vakratunda Vinayaka Hindu Temple, The Basin / Quang Duc Monastery and Temple, Fawkner / St George’s Coptic Orthodox Church, St Albans East / Yen Ming Ming Buddhist Meditation Centre, Sunshine / close-up, Cypriot Turkish Islamic Mosque and Community Centre, Ardeer / Iglesia Ni Christo (Filipino), Altona.
Image 2: Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihara of Victoria (since relocated), Noble Park / Yen Ming Tang Buddhist Meditation Centre, Sunshine / Thien Duc Vietnamese Buddhist Temple, St Albans / Deer Park Mosque, Deer Park / Statue of Quan Am, Melbourne Linh Son Buddhist Congregation, Reservoir / Sikh Temple Melbourne Gurudwara Singh Sabha, Craigieburn / Persian Anglican Church, Alphington / Wat Dhammarangsee (Thai Buddhist Temple), Forest Hill / Dhamma Sarana Buddhist Sri Lankan Association of Victoria, Keysborough / Interior, Phuoc Tuong (Vietnamese Buddhist) Temple, Richmond / Thomastown Mosque and Turkish Education and Islamic Society, Thomastown / Quang Minh Temple (United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation of Victoria), Braybrook / Hien Quang (Vietnamese Buddhist) Temple, Footscray / Lysterfield Mosque, Lysterfield / Interior, Quang Minh Temple, Braybrook / Rooftop, Wat Buddhaangsi, Springvale South / Tenrikyo Melbourne Shinyu (Japanese) Church, Boronia / Be Tree enclosure, Wat Buddhaangsi, Springvale South / Gateway, Linh Son Temple, Reservoir.

Photos by David Beynon
Images: Islamic Cultural Centre, Campbellfield / Interior Gurdwara Sahib (Sikh Temple), Blackburn / Rear, Shri Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple, Carrum Downs / Gateway, Quang Duc Monastery, Fawkner / Phuoc Tuong (Vietnamese) Buddhist Temple, Richmond / Wat Thai Nakorn, Box Hill / Russian Orthodox Church, Brunswick / Umma Islamic Centre, Doncaster East / Melbourne Miharigan Temple, Sunshine / Streetscape, Thomastown Mosques, Thomastown / Sign, Gurudwar Sahib, Blackburn / Phat Quang (Vietnamese) Temple, Footscray West / Dhamma Sarana Buddhist Sri Lankan Association of Victoria, Keysborough / Thien Duc Vietnamese Buddhist Temple, St Albans / Tibetan Buddhist Society, Yarke / Keysborough Mosque & Turkish Islamic and Cultural Centre, Keysborough / Mosque and Albanian Shakie Islamic Society of Dandenong, Dandenong / Wat Buddharangsi, Springvale South / Kurdish Association of Victoria, Glenroy.

Photos by David Beynon
Melbourne’s wealthier inner-eastern suburbs), the city’s fringes would appear to be the place to look to see how changing cultures are affecting the built environment.

The second factor in the lack of appreciation of these buildings has perhaps more to do with the relationship between multiculturalism, Melbourne’s (and by extension Australia’s) identity, and architecture. Australia is now labelled a ‘multicultural’ society, but this is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Furthermore, while ‘White Australia’ has now been dismantled and discredited, recent arguments about Australia not becoming a republic, not changing its flag, and more ominously redrawing its borders and engaging in dehumanising campaigns to exclude refugees, indicate that the old ideas of Australia’s ‘core’ identity remain powerful. Immigrant communities still have to deal with a central conception of Australia as a received and adapted British society. This may seem at odds with the popular conception of multiculturalism, which implies the acceptance of diverse cultural traits as being equal in the national view, but this is not necessarily so. Multiculturalism may have added respect for other cultures that might exist within the nation, but that does not mean that those other cultures are allowed to change the nature of Australia’s ‘core’ identity.

In this respect it is worth drawing on the writing of the Australian cultural critic and philosopher, Ghassan Hage. Hage’s White Nation and Against Paranoid Nationalism are two of the most incisive critiques of Australian multiculturalism. Australia’s identity, Hage asserts, is ‘delineated by a discourse of internal orientalism’. As defined by Edward Said, ‘orientalism’ was a sign of the power of Europe (the ‘West’) over its constituted other (the ‘Orient’ or ‘non-West’). Internal orientalism thus implies that for the mainstream Anglo-Celtic population the notion persists that non-Anglo-Celtic Australians are a bit suspect in their ‘Australian-ness’. He contends that pro-multiculturalists are not as opposed to anti-multiculturalists as they may seem, because they too, share a ‘governmental sense’ of ownership of Australian identity. By way of example, Hage observes how frequently non-Western settlers are in the recurring position of having to justify their identity to ‘natural’ Australians, who, because they are perceived to be the norm, never have to reciprocate with an explanation of their identity. Hage contends that a non-English speaking Caucasian seen in an Australian street is assumed by the majority to be Australian. An Australian-born person of Arab or Vietnamese origin, by contrast, is often assumed to be from
elsewhere. The need for justification implied in the question 'where are you really from?' suggests that the Anglo-Australian questioner's 'belonging' is not itself to be challenged. Hage defines this distinction as being between people who look 'white' and others, whom he provocatively terms 'Third World-looking people' (TWLP), a description that captures mainstream attitudes rather better than the anodyne official 'Non-English-speaking background' (NESB).

Thus, multiculturalism is about food, music, languages, religions; it is about individual choices rather than about changing the politics or core values of Australian society. Nevertheless, negotiations of identity between non-white migrants and the white establishment in the past twenty-five years are perhaps the biggest factor in the slow mental decolonisation of mainstream Australia. As Hage states in the conclusion to White Nation, it is when Australian TWLP begin to 'worry about their nation' as Australians, that concepts such as assimilation develop a whole different complexion (no pun intended). He posits provocative questions about the making of alternate conceptions of Australian identity: 'What if Australia does not need white Australians to keep it together at all?', 'Are whites still good for Australia?', 'Do we need an assimilation program to help ease them into the multicultural mainstream?'

Perceptions of which people are perceived as 'local' are also visited on buildings. Because of the relatively enduring nature of buildings, architecture has always been important in establishing the identity of places. The monumentality of architecture is reassuring, providing observable stability. Architecture not only expresses the aspirations and priorities of those who commission it but also is given meaning through how it frames the events, rituals and activities of human life. Perhaps more than their designers would like, buildings can be eloquent about the messy complexities of everyday life. Nevertheless, value is often ascribed to buildings according to their formal qualities. Every city has urban forms and building types that are accepted as being 'local' in character, usually those that have come to be associated with the origins of the place. Building in the present day is thus often seen in terms of its contextual relationship with the 'original' stock of a given street, suburb, or city, with its assumed meaning and importance. Negotiating the insertion of the new into existing urban environments is often the cause of contestation, as new buildings are judged on the degree of their departure from, or alteration to, such 'original'
elements. In Melbourne, as in other cities, the architectural interventions of recent immigrant groups have a particularly problematic relationship with this privileging of the 'original', as their interventions in the city are patently derived from elsewhere. Their buildings threaten the 'natural' character. It might be suggested that this is just conservatism, and the works of avant-garde architects fare just as badly. However, the interventions of architects—while perhaps being opposed by those in favour of privileging 'heritage'—are nevertheless considered to be 'progressive', indicating that those who support them accept that they are part of the same cultural lineage as the heritage they are opposed to. 'Ethnic' buildings and spaces, at least partially because of their traditional styling, are rarely considered to be progressive.

For this reason, many of these buildings are on marginal sites, far from 'heritage precincts'. Industrial and semi-rural areas are given low value. They are usually far from residences and not considered productive, beautiful or ecologically important. Change on such land passes almost unnoticed. The issue is not whether a culturally radical building is more suitably placed in farmland or on an industrial estate than amongst houses, but the degree to which its placement on any given site disrupts the status quo. The question that needs to be asked is 'what belongs here'? How do traditional criteria for belonging, such as the primacy of occupation, or the length of tenure, stand up under conditions of social and cultural change? What rights do (relative) newcomers have to alter environments that predate their arrival?

These particular 'new' building types have another problem. A look at the images in this chapter suggests that many of these buildings represent attempts to evoke or emulate traditional styles and building typologies, and that these traditions are ones unfamiliar to the Western-oriented eye. In an original 'homeland' a newly constructed traditional building might be applauded as evidence of the maintenance of local culture. It might even be a tourist attraction. However, contemporary architecture throughout the world remains culturally dominated by a particular thread of Eurocentric thinking that has led from the Enlightenment to the modern movement of the mid twentieth century. Aesthetically and spatially, and despite movements such as postmodernism, architecture remains bound by the self-referential and totalising rhetoric of the modernist project. Despite this, it does not appear that the architectural world can continue to ignore the plurality of the contemporary world, but how can architecture come to represent difference?
In a literal sense it can be through the incorporation of forms or spaces in a building that are recognisably different from what surrounds them, or in the deliberate juxtaposition of items seen as incongruous within the society where they are placed. The recently completed architecture of Federation Square illustrates some of the difficulties that architecture has in representing real plurality. Its architects conveyed their intention in this regard:

The architecture of diversity and of a pluralistic democracy must provide concepts of order and expression which exceed the present and the known, in order to initiate a dynamic resonance between the citizens and the city.\textsuperscript{14}

Statements such as ‘architecture of diversity’ suggest that the building is, amongst other things, an attempt to architecturally deal with Melbourne’s multiculturalism. The building deconstructs architectural language, embracing complexity as an aesthetic to deal with difference in the city. As a major public building, and thus geared to an international as much as a local audience, Federation Square is not only intended to provide services for the city, but is also intended to be representative of Melbourne on a number of levels, from architectural benchmark to tourist attraction and cultural icon. Federation Square both physically and figuratively places itself in the centre of Melbourne.

On the other hand, architecture that traces its ancestry from elsewhere is peripheral architecturally as well as in location. In their representation of seemingly incongruous motifs and techniques, and their mixing of the archaic and unfamiliar, buildings such as the Shri Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple, the Cypriot Turkish Mosque and the Wat Buddharangsri operate in ways antithetical to the tacit rules of the contemporary architectural establishment. They do not simply apply techniques of spatial composition and signification. Their architecture not only reproduces symbolism and motifs, but also reinterprets them within a local context. In their evocation of other places, their architecture represents the flipside to what are commonly seen to be the effects of globalisation in the contemporary world. Globalisation is usually taken to mean the increasing Western/multinational influenced homogenisation of the world. In the field of architecture, it implies the ubiquity of slick-skinned office buildings, airports and fast food franchises. In contrast the buildings of Melbourne’s ethnic minority groups seem to deliberately evoke distant times and locations. Instead of
architecture that has spread out West, these buildings have travelled in the other direction. Far from being architecturally avant-garde, they might be described, adopting Hage's terminology, as 'Third World-looking' buildings. Yet paradoxically, while they evoke otherness in their visual appearance, they are not directed to an international audience, but serve the needs of local people. Their diversity is an embodiment of Melbourne's diversity. They represent the desires and compromises of everyday immigrant life. The buildings illustrated here operate, at least partially, within different cultural, spatial and temporal paradigms than those of the Australian architectural mainstream. They also often embody particular religious/philosophical attitudes, in particular towards the role of architecture in facilitating, embodying or symbolising belief. If 'Third World-looking' buildings are fascinating and disturbing, this is not because of anything inherent in their architecture, but because they evoke the presence of 'Third World-looking' people. If there was no sense that the users of these buildings were 'different', their symbols would merely be harmless exotica, theatrical but unthreatening like the faux-Oriental style of Chinese restaurants. The 'ethnic' character of a culture is only really an issue in an environment where there are others whose difference is unable to be assimilated, which is as much due to the attitudes of the mainstream as it is to that of particular groups or individuals. As the Mauritian-French activist Frantz Fanon succinctly put it: 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.'

The important point is that the buildings illustrated here are not foreign objects, they are local buildings. Their purpose is to serve members of local communities. They are constructed and used locally. At the same time they represent certain traits, methods and histories; they are expressions of belonging to particular cultures. They represent the emergence of new forms of Australian architectural culture that are derived from Asia, from the Middle East, and from Africa, rather than from the European models with which Australian architecture has been traditionally identified. As a consequence, 'Third World-looking' buildings do not just signify Melbourne's changing identity, but challenge preconceptions of what is 'Australian'. Architecture, after all, is there to provide the armature for events, rituals and everyday life. As such, the nature of migrant space, and architecture's framing of it, has a role in determining the new social and cultural constructions that collectively make up the real diversity of the city.
Such a scenario suggests that passive marginality is not to remain the lot of Australia’s cultural minorities. The president of the Hindu Society of Victoria proclaimed at its inauguration that the Shri Shiva Vishnu Hindu Temple will not only be a focus for the Hindu community of Melbourne but, ‘a centre for the study of religion and Asian philosophy and a pivotal point for cultural activities of the communities with Eastern traditions’. The building’s basic function as a place of worship for Hindus is overlaid with much broader ambitions, which posit such generalised subjects as ‘Asian philosophy’ and ‘Eastern traditions’ as being locatable on its site in a dynamic, rather than just a preservational, sense. Similarly, the presence of local mosques might suggest not just the existence of lonely outposts of a foreign culture but the ongoing importance, however sublimated, of the principles of the d’awaah, the mission to spread Islam. Some Islamic writers suggest that d’awaah is not just one of the goals, but perhaps the primary goal in migration which then becomes hijra, migration with a mission. The process of settlement of minority Muslims in the West is thus an opportunity for Islam to redefine itself, rather than remaining embedded in the inertia of traditionally ‘Islamic’ societies. Distancing from the source may lead to a rethinking of the fundamentals of faith that leads to the possibility of greater profundity, not a physical journeying necessarily, but a migration to a higher plane of clarity and spirituality. These views of multicultural settlement may perhaps be overtly optimistic in a contemporary climate of fear and distrust, but they counter the more usual arguments that diasporic communities are inately conservative, trying to ‘hold on’ rather than grow and develop. In this context immigrant groups are not merely reacting to their new surroundings, but subjects with their own history who are not only creating their own future, they are contributing to the future of the land on which they have settled. To some the propagation of such apparently competing world views will be seen as threatening. However, the generally peaceful plurality of cities such as Melbourne is suggestive that differences need not necessarily lead to conflict.

On the other hand, the relative smoothness of Melbourne’s evolution into a diversified metropolis should not be taken for granted or its present economic and social inequalities ignored. Beyond the representation of cultural origin (the authority of which is open to conjecture), these buildings suggest the degree to which architecture reflects the complexity of our immigrant society. However, no recent guide to Melbourne or Australian
architecture mentions any of the buildings illustrated here. They should. The recent guide to London architecture, which lists the new Hindu temple among recent works by the current canonical English architects (Rogers, Foster, Alsop, etc.), indicates that there the Hindu temple is being taken seriously as a piece of architecture, rather than an anthropological addendum to the world of building. Federation Square might have been controversial, but drive down Springvale Road if you want to see how Melbourne’s built environment is really being culturally transformed. Instead of something that represents difference from a single viewpoint, here is difference as negotiated, entangled and lived. Consider how much more lasting provocation would be generated if a mosque or temple had been built opposite St Paul’s Cathedral.

Notes

1 This survey formed part of my PhD thesis ‘Hybrid representations: The public architecture of migrant communities in Melbourne, completed at University of Melbourne in 2002.
2 At the time of the survey, 1997-2001.
3 Architecture Australia is the journal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. ‘Domain’ is a weekly architecture and design supplement in Melbourne’s Age newspaper.
8 G Hage, *White Nation*.
17 T Asad (interviewed by S. Mahmood), ’Modern power and the reconfiguration of religious tradition’, *Stanford Electronic Humanities Review*, 5: 1, 1996.