AESTHETIC ANXIETIES: THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING THE MIGRANT HOUSE IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The interest of this paper concerns the problem about the migrant house – why has it been so difficult to define? In order to examine the problem of the lack of literature on the migrant house it is important to look at the literature on the Australian house, and to examine how the migrant house is positioned or not included in this literature. It will approach this through what is accepted as discourse analysis, but with a particular position informed by the work of Stuart Hall on representation.

INTRODUCTION

The migrant house is not as yet a category in studies of architecture, in Australian studies, or Australian history. This does not mean there is not research on the migrant house or that there is not interest in the wider community (Redfern & Lozanovska, 2008). The migrant house generates debate whenever it is mentioned, but in the literature on the Australian house, its lack of citation is not missed. Discussions on the migrant house have therefore been circular: when a scholar has put forward a thesis, others have found exceptions and the perception has remained that perhaps the migrant house is a myth. The interest of this paper concerns the problem about the migrant house – why has it been so difficult to define? It will approach this through what is accepted as discourse analysis, but with a particular position informed by the work of Stuart Hall on representation. Drawing on a semiotic approach to analysing texts, images, events, in the chapter “The Work of Representation,” Hall states, “in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority (Hall 1997:42).” This paper will examine the literature on the Australian house to discuss why the migrant house is elided from such studies through the theoretical framework of representation.

In contrast to the lack of studies on the migrant house, studies of the migrant home have developed in disciplines such as cultural studies and cultural geography, and have become an accumulative body of knowledge. Why has the migrant home gained scholarly attention and position in Australian cultural studies? The paper will thus focus on unravelling the problem of the migrant house, but will endeavour to analyse this distinction, attending to contradictions and complexities between the house and the home. It will put forward a thesis that the migrant house is problematic for two reasons: it is perceived as a culturally territorial act, and secondly that even if the house is privately owned, its image is visible to the public. For this reason the paper proposes that the problem about defining the migrant house is entangled with its aesthetics.
THE HOUSE AND THE HOME

The home has emerged as a central concept in the discourse on migration and diaspora and the anthropologist Ghassan Hage (Hage 1997) has formulated the concept home-building around the production and consumption of food. He argues that the effort migrants put into home-building illustrates their sense of belonging in the new country, and is about feeling homely in their new context, and not about homesickness, for the old place (country of origin). Hage is emphasising the making of home as a process of settlement for the migrant. Contrary to simplistic ideas about integration, home-building processes are not about forgetting familiar cultural practices but finding ways that these can co-exist within the new context. Hage’s theoretical framework shifts the more prominent thinking around home in relation to migration and diaspora in which it is argued that domestic cultural practices serve as a way of remembering the old place, and reliving an attachment to that place (Tolia-Kelly 2004).

Savas’s ethnographic study on material culture, especially practices of home decoration, furnishings, aesthetic objects, reorients the subject of food in Hage’s work (and focus on Lebanese immigrants in Sydney), bringing into focus the aesthetic productions of immigrants (with a focus on Turkish immigrants in Vienna). The objects, Savas argues do not have connections with prior pre-migration contexts, nor a particular ethnic association in terms of tradition, and yet have developed and are identified with the Turkish diaspora community in Vienna. The significant thesis is that the Turkish home in Vienna is created through the intertwined biographies of people and material objects, and as such it has become a collective symbol. Further, Savas has proposed that more than representing a static and differentiated group, these practices have become an “aesthetic and social medium for the narration of Turkish experiences of migration to and resettlement in Vienna (Savas 2010: 317).” The implication here is twofold: firstly that migration and resettlement involves an aesthetic production of identity that is not a replica of material objects from the country of origin; and secondly, that this is a narration that involves time and transformation.

Authors have also argued that migrants develop a mixture of cultural practices that can act as bridges between the two cultures, some associated with the country of origin and others producing newly attained cultural alliances. This latter framework relating to the blending of cultural practices is popular amongst scholars and proposes the more contemporary theory of plural identities and trans-cultural belonging. However, as Savas argues, such authors assign practices and objects static geographical and cultural settings and assume that these have fixed and stable meanings (Savas 2010: 316). Like the changing practices and meaning of culture, the objects of culture are not static.

It is worth contextualising what Hage means by home-building. Ghassan Hage has argued that there are two types of multiculturalism (Hage 1997). Cosmo-multiculturalism is the classy, sophisticated, cosmopolitan multiculturalism evident in official displays and manifested in people’s choice of restaurant or food. It is conscious of the international field and is associated with a privileged globalisation – a cosmopolitan aesthetic that has access to the world both in the world and at home (in Fitzroy and
Carlton). The other, inhabited multiculturalism is a lived condition, lived in by migrants, it is lower class, and involves ordinary home cooking. Hage critiques cosmo-multiculturalism as a multiculturalism without migrants, arguing that the subject of this type of multiculturalism desires an abundance of otherness without others, for his/her own satisfaction of diversity. In his work there is a desire to valorise inhabited multiculturalism which is grounded in the reality of migrant home building. It is in this context that the idea of something familiar is a way for home-building in the new context. He offers an example about a Lebanese couple, who on finding a Lebanese cucumber, went into an exhilarated expression of happiness in the form of song and dance. Home-building becomes a way of belonging not limited to assimilation or integration, but as Hage proposes formulated by a structure of security, familiarity, community and sense of possibility.

My studies of southern European migrants in Melbourne show that the relationship between the migrant and the house is intensive, and that the building of the house is a significant symbolisation of the process of resettlement (Lozanovska 1997, 2008). These include a study of elderly immigrants who have lived in their houses for a long time (more than 25 years) and a study with Victoria Ganta of an enclave in Northcote (a suburb 7km north of the CBD in Melbourne) comprising several streets in which the sites were purchased on one day and the houses were built in a period of 5 years, 1965-1970. In addition, visual documentations of migrant houses in the northern suburbs of Northcote and Thornbury and Bell Park in Geelong have been compiled. How can the study of the migrant house be informed by the knowledge of the migrant home? I have proposed the idea of house-building as a corollary to home-building. Already evident in the semantic shift is that the house is a concrete thing, and as a physical entity it has empirical parameters - scale, measure, materials, size, location, history (who built, why, how, under what circumstances, how much it cost, what is its value, who lives in it)? The problem of defining it begins here. Already there is more at stake in relation to the location of the house in culture and to house acquisition. House-building generates a different set of contradictions, associations, economies compared to home-building.

In order to examine the problem of the lack of literature on the migrant house it is important to look at the literature on the Australian house, and to examine how the migrant house is positioned or not included in this literature.

THE AUSTRALIAN HOUSE

It is argued, Australia is centrally associated with the acquisition of a house (Davison, Dingle, O’Hanlyn, 1995). There is extensive literature on the Australian house, and significantly more on the non-architect designed house (Boyd 1951; Irving 1985; Parrossien & Girggs, 1983; Unstead & Henderson, 1969; Troy, 2000; Cuffley, 1993; Taylor, 1990). Much of this literature elaborates on décor, interiors, gardens, and all other applied aesthetics that is the result of the inhabitants’ aesthetic preference. From the abundance and tone of this literature it can be stated that Australia is preoccupied with its identity, and that the house serves as a vehicle to express, symbolise and represent the Australian identity. The impact of migration,
the way of life of the migrant inhabitants, their taste and traditions imported from cultures other than England and Ireland is barely noted in this body of knowledge.

Immigration has been perceived in contradictory ways in relation to this central Australian icon of the Australian house. An annotated bibliography entitled “Immigrant Housing in Australia” and published in 1994 states that despite studies on many issues related to Australian immigration, relatively little has been written regarding housing of and for migrants. In a chapter of another report ‘A survey of immigration and housing,’ the authors note that the house is historically connected to Australian culture, citing the Australian Financial Gazette in 1891 which stated that it was a man’s paramount duty to acquire a house, through to post-war policy which identified housing as central to the national interest (Junankar et al, 1993). In the survey above, two significant points are made: firstly that policy consolidated at the point of federal constitution in 1901 produced a white oasis in the south which erected political and cultural walls to non-white immigration, such that by the end of World War 2, 99% of the population had British heritage; secondly, it is noted that the fear that immigrants would compete for the same housing stock was used to argue against extending immigration policy after World War 2. In the 1940s only 9% of Australia’s population was born overseas, and 90% of those were from either UK or NZ. Immigration from Southern Europe (Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia) transformed the then homogenous Australian public. Housing these immigrants became controversial to the Australian public. The Australian house is historically a contested terrain in relation to immigration.

Statistics are complemented by publications on Australian housing. The volume European Housing in Australia (Troy, 2000) was an undertaking in response to a need for ‘a good general understanding of the housing history of the nation,’ and the companion book to one on indigenous housing in Australia. Both volumes are from social science discipline perspectives. However, it is evident that migration is not seen as a major trajectory in Australian housing in this volume as several of the chapters explore the colonial period up until the early Twentieth century, followed by topical concerns such as homelessness and domesticity. If the objective of the volume is on the social history of Australian housing, why is there not a contribution about immigrants’ housing after WW2? The introduction outlines that this volume is not a chronological account and that its focus is on the stereotype and the dominant distinctive form. This refers to the detached house governed by home ownership. The reader looking for an analysis on migrant houses has to be satisfied with the content of the dominant type. In one sense it is. Home ownership was even higher amongst southern European immigrants than their non-immigrant counterparts. But if the study is on social history and includes chapters on domesticity would not the socio-cultural practices of the southern European immigrants require further analysis?

It has been important to survey the availability of literature on Australian architecture and the architecture of the Australian house. The catalogue of the Australian Institute of Architects’ bookshop in Melbourne (Architext), for instance, contains volumes, under the heading ‘Australian Architecture,’ many about the Australian house, but very few refer to non-Anglo-Celtic architectural buildings, origins, or characteristics that are also produced in Australia (and none that we could identify) (Beynon and Lozanovska, 2009). In Irving’s edited volume, The History and Design of the Australian House, (Irving et al 1985), Britain is the reference as the source for the Australian house. I have found that migration has been mentioned once (Irving, 1985: 8), but not discussed as another historical force shaping the
Australian house or city. Some chapters in the book focus on architect designed houses, but many premise their argument on the idea that an Australian vernacular emerged, and that its origins were British. For example in the chapter on the Australian garden the idea of plant propagation as a British pastime can be seen as a matrix through which to perceive the historiography of the volume – it looks at stylistic historical origins of housing stock such as Georgian, Victorian, Federation, and how these are then cultivated into an Australian idiom – the Australian terrace, the Australian garden.

A similar approach to historiography emerges whether the volume is within architecture or from the social sciences: the focus of the study is to do with histories prior to large scale European, and especially Southern European immigration. This is further elided by the interchangeable use of the term Europe with the terms Britain or England, and the term, colonists with immigrants – an intriguing conflation for scholars in the social sciences. The effect of this conflation is that the potential subject of [E]uropean rather than British housing in Australia, is not examined. Neither is southern European immigration, rather than British and Irish immigration, examined. But the interchangeable and generalist use of these terms produces confusion about references and produces the typical circular debates – ‘but the British are European and the British and Irish were also immigrants.’ Yes, this is true. But in the context of an Australia with very direct policies about British heritage and cultural and linguistic homogeneity, to be a Southern European immigrant was definitively not to be a British immigrant. A rigorous analysis would propose differentiated categories for these groups of immigrants. More severe in the scholarship above was that the idea of examining non-British-Celtic immigrant housing is not in either the imagination or interest of housing scholars.

There are a few exceptions. Apperly et al’s (1989) publication has a two-page spread entitled, Late Twentieth Century Immigrants Nostalgic which notes the balustrades and arches as symbolic of success in the new country and proposes this is an aesthetic imported from migrants’ homelands. Similar to Apperly, Vulker has also referred to social character, and wealth and status as descriptions of the migrant houses rather than specific architectural features of the houses (Vulker 1986:69). Vulker recognises “Some houses have acquired a new façade in order to resemble the features of a particular style reminiscent of grand opulent houses back in the “home” country (Vulker 1986:68).” If we consider the work of Savas such proposals would be questionable. These two pages are directly preceded by two pages on Late Twentieth Century Australian Nostalgic, referring to the resurgence of ‘colonial’ styles of earlier homestead architecture. This historical coincidence between the Australian and Immigrant Nostalgic differentiates clearly Australian from Immigrant. Further analysis would unravel how in one instance all immigrants are encompassed by the British immigrant as the origin of Australia, and in another instance, the category of immigrant is set in distance, if not opposition to the category Australian. Suffice to state here that in the names Australian or Immigrant, the authors unwittingly reveal the unspoken foundation of an Australian aesthetic that is constituted prior to and against a so-called Immigrant aesthetic. In addition the heritage movement generated the classification of buildings of the first half of the twentieth century, and thereby established a foundation for ‘good taste’ in architecture as directly associated with an aesthetic heritage that primarily originated in England; and secondarily and with a distinctive hierarchy, the houses of the 1920s that emerged from America.
The affects of migration and migrant inhabitation on the house is noted in Housing in Australia (Vulker, 1986) a study guide about housing that takes a social perspective of architecture. It is a unique publication that exemplifies a position associated with the mid 1980s at the height of Australia’s multicultural policies. The author Judith Vulker was an educational consultant to the then RAIA, and the book was published by Jacaranda press. In this and another publication by the same author, Studying Australian Architecture (Vulker 1990), immigration is addressed, and indeed it features as the number 1 point of post war demographic change. In the chapter on Housing Alternatives, a large section on immigrant housing is included. In addition to an image of an almost pop-art façade of an immigrant house, a map showing the top 30 source countries of migration to Australia shows that at that time, apart from immigrants from Britain and Ireland (42.9%), the next largest source of immigrants was from Southern Europe (Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia), nearing 20%.

More interesting is that Vulker proposes discussion questions: “What architectural features of our houses today can be traced to the influence of immigrants?” (Vulker 1986: 68); and a question for Debate: “The variation in housing form is evident in houses built since 1950. People have expressed their cultural values and attitudes by the appearance of the houses in which they live. Such variation has a detrimental effect on the appearance of the suburban landscape (Vulker 1986:69).” Vulker is unsure about her position in relation to this question. Vulker has described the adaptations made by migrants on Victorian terrace houses in Melbourne and on suburban brick veneer houses as having a “detrimental effect on the appearance of the suburban landscape (Vulker 1986:68).” And yet there is appraisal for the adaptation of the style through works that have been carried out on the façades. Vulker describes the contributions of migrants to housing in Australia as adding creativity by juxtaposing styles that have been previously recognised as lacking authenticity: “The migration of people from all over the world to Australia has enhanced variation in housing form. We now see houses feature a Tudor gable over a Greek balustrade (Vulker 1986:68).” An interesting if humorous proposition!

While not a rigorous analysis of architectural style, this book has identified migrant houses by reconceptualising architecture as a cultural production and by valuing aesthetics. The façade emerges as a crucial element for the identification of the houses as either migrant houses or not migrant houses. This was a book produced to inform and generate debate in the secondary school classrooms. Unfortunately there has not been much debate on the issue about the façades of migrant houses either in the classroom or in fact in the academy, and there has not been development of this question. In Studying Australian Architecture, Judy Vulker (Vulker 1990, note changed her name) has included a section entitled ‘the migration of architectural ideas to Australia,’ which includes a note on migration and its effect on diversity, and the diversification of project homes to include what Vulker has called ‘mediterranean style villa’ (Vulker 1990: 32). The migrant house was not just an individual production but an artefact that began to be manufactured en masse.

AESTHETIC ANXIETIES
Two decades of interdisciplinary theories, conceptual frameworks about place, history, and identity borrowed from cultural theory, and five decades of impact of southern European immigration and settlement has not closed the chasm in Australian architectural historiography. One problem is that architectural discourse does not easily contribute to and participate in cultural discourse. In *Architecture Australia*, Carey Lyon (Lyon 2007), the president of the RAIA, has strongly argued that architects have not participated and contributed to the debates over culture and identity. This is a curious paradox. While the question of an Australian identity in architecture is central to architectural discourse, this has not extended to and engagement of questions on cultural identity as debate and discussion (Irving 1985, Apperly et al 1989). Boyd (1960) had captured these themes in his critique of the Australian suburb and its relations to the land built on what Boyd called the ‘pioneering cult.’

Several studies have discussed the houses built by migrants, sometimes calling the houses in immigrant cities (especially Toronto, Melbourne), ‘monster houses’ (Mitchell), ‘too many houses’ (Jacobs), ‘mediterranean nostalgic’ (Apperly et al), ‘mediterranean villa’ (Vulker), ‘third-world looking buildings’ (Hage, Beynon). Migrant houses built in the sites of emigration (Ecuador, Mexico) have been called, ‘bad taste architecture’ (Klauhaus), ‘remittance houses & transnational architecture’ (Lopez). In this paper the focus is on the migrant house of immigrant receiving cities. While studies on migrant housing in Australia have not yet formed a critical and integrated body of knowledge, there are significant contributions: Winkler (2009) has examined ‘white space’ in relation to a group called Save Our Suburbs (SOS), and Levine (2010) has looked at migrant housing in Melbourne and Israel. In addition scholars elsewhere are contributing to a global studies on migrant housing, Datta (2006) has researched the construction and meaning of home and city of Polish construction workers in London. Identifications of the migrant house are derived from an empirical and observable building stock. Houses named above are documented, and thereby can be said to have existential value. Through these studies migrant houses have begun to gain representational and symbolic value. The identification of this stock of buildings offers a tangible and concrete record of the impact of migration, an empirical database that is being acknowledged, analysed and interpreted at a global level.

What emerges from the literature on the Australian house is the significance of the façade as cultural expression of the house, and the house as ownership of territory. I have stated that the house is a thing, a physical entity and therefore produces itself as an existential entity. As such the house is also an economic and cultural production. Architectural analytical methods may contribute to the discussion because the façade lends itself to elevation analysis and the house as territory lends itself to an analysis of the plan – the former producing signification, and the latter inscribing a space for the cultural practices of the inhabitants. In the studies cited above, the migrant houses enter the fields of representation, knowledge, and importantly the migrant house is given value as subject for academic research, participates in the identity narratives of the nation. What the house looks like is important, and we are reminded to look again, and look closely (Silverman 1996).

Unlike public buildings or spaces of ethnic communities, especially worship places and market spaces, which are more expressly a production of ideas that have been transported from elsewhere to Australia, migrant houses are not expressly very different to their counterparts that are not perceived to be migrant houses. The aesthetic difference is in detail rather than as form or typology. One way of understanding
the detail as a crucial aesthetic dimension is to consider the house and home in relation to references to the homeland. The ideas of the house and home are shown to be intertwined in Davison’s chapter on the ‘Colonial Origins of the Australian home,’ as he elaborates that for Australians home was both an idea, ‘a homeland from which most colonials had come’, and a place, the houses that they built in Australia (Davison 2000: 9). He notes that an English visitor in 1937 commented on how Australians call their houses homes. This idea of homeland, home and house are significant factors for understanding the migrant houses and to unravel why the migrant houses are considered un-Australian. Details, while small in measure and scale, loom large in relation to cultural references. The homelands that migrant houses cite through details of their otherwise ordinary brick veneer appearance, are not England, Britain or Ireland. In previous publications I have called this a mild aesthetic. But the differentiation between migrant and non-migrant houses in Australia is noted in what has been called in a different context the tell-tale detail, the detail that will, unwittingly and in an unplanned way, give away the bigger story, the myth and the national narrative, by pointing to a particular cultural reference of the inhabitants.

The literature reveals that this tell-tale detail is important. The detail signals the role of the house as it mediates the home and the homeland, both. The Australian house is symbolically tied to a particular homeland. Even if the cream brick veneer is not literally imported from Britain or Ireland, both the inhabitants that prefer cream brick veneers (to other colour bricks) and the details of and about the house, are perceived as a reference to an imaginary homeland constituted by an imaginary community originating from that homeland.

In the publication, Cream Brick Frontier (Davison, Dingle, O’Hanlyn 1995) houses belonging to Southern European migrants feature tokenistically (p.27 & p.49). The details of the cream brick does not easily belong to everyone nor does it represent everyone. Migrant houses are thus absorbed into a matrix of sameness, but not discussed as part of the content of sameness. If they are marked as different there is a framework that represents them as looking at the past or backwards to where the immigrants have come from. For this reason it is important to critique the interpretation that the houses are neither here nor there, but some kind of bridge. The point that is difficult to accommodate is that migrant houses are here in Melbourne, in the city of immigration. The problem for a homogenous Australia is that houses are evidence that migrants are here (here to stay?) and that as such the production of migrant houses projects a different image of Australia’s cultural reference.

CONCLUSION

A house is an important mode of assimilation because a way of life evoked in Boyd’s ‘pioneering cult’ is intrinsically set by this suburban paradigm (Boyd 1960, chapter 4). Immigration policies presented immigration as something that would fill the undesirable gaps of Australian society. The problem in defining the migrant house is that it illustrates that migrant settlement is not temporary. Literature on migrant housing in Australia has produced a situation where by the migrant house is the same as the Australian house implying that no separate study is required, or that its difference evolves out of its nostalgia for the past and place of origin, and therefore not a part of the present Australian culture. Hall’s theories emphasise the power and significance of representation, such that ‘a widespread authority’ has
developed across the spectrum, from immigration policy, socio-economic literature, to architectural history that elide a place for the migrant house. Writings on immigration and housing have noted a fear that immigrants would compete for housing stock. Migrant houses have inscribed spaces for the practices of different traditions, languages and rituals. The appearances of the migrant houses illustrate the imaginary capacity of what Australia might look like. However, lurking in the shadows of aesthetic anxieties resulting from such appearances, are anxieties about the proliferation of migrant houses affecting the national and cultural space of Australia. Not only what Australia might look like but what it might be.

REFERENCES


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