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MIGRANCY, MODERNITY AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

David Beynon

Deakin University, Australia, david.beynon@deakin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Australian Home Beautiful's October 1960 Edition was devoted to the modernisation of the Victorian and Edwardian-era houses of Australian cities' inner suburbs. One of the articles inside was entitled 'Terrace Houses are Common Problem', in which the magazine's architectural consultant Leonard A. Bullen suggested; "With houses of this type, the multiplicity of embellishments that appear in almost every possible place is irritating to eyes that have become accustomed to the cleaner and less ornamented lines of modern houses" and "The first necessity is to get rid of the superfluous decoration and emphasise horizontal features." (Bullen 1960, 31). The post-World War Two period was a time when Australia's traditional imagining of itself was confronted by both popular modernity and a diversity of new migrant cultures and ways of thinking. In a contemporary environment that theoretically celebrates diversity and creates audiences for increasingly multiplying expressions of culture and history, perhaps it is time that 1950s and '60s alterations to old houses were re-imagined as intrinsic elements in Australia's cultural landscape. This supposition will be discussed in relation to the United Nations' 2002 Kanazawa Resolutions' definition of the relationship between culture and sustainability as 'dialogical coexistence' (Nadarajah and Yamamoto 2007).

“DRESSING UP THE SINGLE FRONT”

Much of the success of this facelift is due to the substitution of the severely plain for the grossly over-ornamented . . . Façade was improved with a bigger window opening . . . The cast concrete porch shelter is carried across the full width of the house . . ." (Australian Home Beautiful 1960, 35).

When culture is mentioned in relation to architecture, this often refers the notion of buildings as representations of cultural heritage, and framed in terms of the preservation and conservation of historic buildings and streetscapes. 'On the one hand, buildings exist as stand-alone artifacts, and on the other, they are artifacts that express the deep meanings, aspirations, and social order of a culture' (Howard 2006, 95). However, considering the diverse demography of a contemporary Australian city, what constitutes this culture?

The United Nations' 2002 Kanazawa Resolutions provide some useful definitions for discussion of this question. These resolutions were formulated as the result of a series of United Nations conferences on the relationship between culture and

sustainability. The Kanazawa Resolutions argue that sustaining cultures in terms of contemporary life is a matter of 'dialogical coexistence' (Nadarajah and Yamamoto 2007). They take the notion of cultural heritage into a contemporary and globalised context by linking it to ideas of cultural diversity and pluralism, similar to Sharon Zukin's notion of cities as a 'fluid process of forming, expressing, and enforcing identities of individuals, social groups, or spatially constructed communities' (Zukin 1995, 289). The resolutions argue that cultural sustainability is not just a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but an ongoing dialogue between a locality and its people (Nadarajah and Yamamoto 2007). This paper will explore this definition by looking at the alterations made to Australian residential buildings in the post-World War II period, exploring in particular the intersection of architectural and social meanings in a period when popular forms of architectural Modernism and a rapid increase in diversified migration converged on Australian cities. To illustrate this exploration, the paper will concentrate on Richmond, an inner suburb of Melbourne, and an area of diverse immigrant settlement since the 1950s. Material for this paper, other than from cited sources, is based on a photographic survey of Richmond's residential buildings undertaken by the author in 2009.

At the end of World War II, Richmond was considered to be a slum district. Traditionally inhabited by the Wurundjeri people, the area had, in 1839 been divided by Robert Hoddle into farmlet allotments, but by the late nineteenth century Richmond has become an area for concentrated industry. Most of the area's residential buildings by the late nineteenth century were the modest dwellings of factory workers. These inhabitants became increasingly impoverished by the depression of the 1930s, and the Richmond was a focus of Melbourne's slum abolition movement of the 1940s and 1950s (McCalman 1998, 8). By this time, many of inner Melbourne's wealthier residents had taken the opportunity to relocate to the newer, more spacious outer suburbs, a phenomenon that correlates with what was happening that was considered to be inevitable. As Logan has recounted, at the time the theories of urban geography propounded by the Chicago School of Social Ecology argued that the middle classes of Western cities would inevitably be drawn away from the decaying and cramped inner areas of industrial cities towards the more modern and spacious developments at their peripheries (Logan 1985, 5-6). Freed by the automobile, upwardly mobile citizens would prefer the safety of the new outer suburb, served as they were by a new infrastructure of roads and freeways and modern shopping centres. It was common wisdom that the inner city would be left to those who had no choice, and those who for some reason rejected progress; recent migrants, low-waged workers, the aged, and a few artists and other bohemians (Pahl 1968). As a result, inner suburban Victorian- and Edwardian-era building stock was not greatly valued. McCalman recalls in her history of Richmond; Australians were obsessed with the new; the old should be razed as quickly as possible. The Prest Social Survey investigators tended to think that the only good news about a very old house was that it was soon to be demolished. One in Johnson Street, North Richmond, was a sand-brick cottage built in the early 1840s and must have been one of the oldest extant houses in Melbourne. It was run down but liveable and surrounded by an old-world cottage garden. Everyone was delighted that it was due to be demolished at any time (McCalman 1998, 10).

State governments of the time, worried about a population decline in the inner suburbs, had no official problem with this, and the most obvious impact was the demolition of large numbers of houses in north Richmond to construct new public housing. The Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works' 1954 Master Plan

recommended “comprehensive redevelopment” of Richmond and other inner Melbourne suburbs, recommending demolition of large numbers of mostly Victorian-era houses in order to construct new public housing, the most prominent example of which are the high-rise towers of the Housing Commission estates of Richmond, Flemington, Carlton (Logan 1985, 150).

“GET RID OF THE SUPERFLUOUS DECORATION”

However, these efforts at wholesale demolition remained incomplete, and so the modernization of inner suburban buildings was also promoted, *Home Beautiful's* October 1960 edition being a clear example of this. *Home Beautiful* was, as it is now, a popular publication, and gave advice was given on altering inner suburban dwellings to make them pleasingly ‘modern’ (Cuffley, 1993, 35). In ‘Terrace Houses are a Common Problem’, their architectural consultant suggests ‘With houses of this type, the multiplicity of embellishments that appear in almost every possible place is irritating to eyes that have become accustomed to the cleaner and less ornamented lines of modern houses’ (Bullen 1960, 31). and ‘The first necessity is to get rid of the superfluous decoration and emphasise horizontal features.’ In the same magazine can be found the recommendation to ‘Unburden the Queen Anne.’ “With a dominating feature such as the turret, which is so much out of harmony with modern architectural ideals, very little can be done aesthetically without removing the feature altogether . . .” (Australian Home Beautiful 1960, 38).

As Figures 1, 2 and 3 suggest, in Richmond it would appear that *Home Beautiful's* advice was widely acted upon. In the area there are numerous post-war ‘modernisations’ of Victorian- and Edwardian-era cottages and terrace houses. These, as seen in the Figures, took some characteristic forms. Commonly the narrow timber-framed front windows were replaced by wider ones with slimmer modern frames. As well as replacing an often decaying existing window, the new wider openings allowed in more light. Elaborate Victorian-era veranda roofs, with cast-iron lacework and curved corrugated iron roof sheeting, were often removed, and replaced either by simpler structures with flat roofs supported on slim metal struts, or open pergola framing, which provided shade in summer, and sun penetration in winter. Grape vines were grown on the new pergolas (see image in Figure 1). Veranda floors, traditionally surfaced with tiles or timber boards, were replaced with concrete slabs. Dilapidated weatherboards covering the exterior walls were clad in a brickwork skin, which was sometimes rendered. If real brickwork was unaffordable then the newly available brick-pattern cladding would suffice (Figure 3). Light colours were applied in render and paint, commonly white or pale shades of yellow or grey.

Most of the above alterations correlate with the advice being given by *Home Beautiful* in 1960. Only the occasional use of classical columns and arches (see image in Figure 3) suggest other influences. However, when these altered buildings are viewed today, they are not so much regarded as evidence for prevailing ideas about modernity in the 1950s and 1960s, but more specifically identified with another phenomenon, the growth and increasing diversity of immigrant settlement at the time. A terrace house with a white rendered front wall, flat concrete porch and aluminum-framed window is now seen as not so much as Modernised but as Mediterraneanised (Allon 2002: 102). This connection is, on the face of it, supported by the demographic changes to Richmond in the 1950s and 1960s. The low value

ascribed to the area and its building stock meant that the area was an affordable place of settlement for new migrants. From being an area that was overwhelmingly of English and Irish background before World War II, the 1961 Census found that 40% of Richmond's population was of southern European descent; from Greece, Italy, Turkey, Malta, Yugoslavia and Lebanon.



Figure 1: Post-World War II alterations to Richmond Houses 1 (images by author)



Figure 2: Post-World War II alterations to Richmond Houses 1 (images by author)



Figure 3: Post-World War II alterations to Richmond Houses 1 (images by author)

THERE COULD BE A “TRENDY APPEALS ABROAD”

The old buildings of Melbourne’s inner suburbs presented an opportunity for these new migrants. Their modernisations also correlated with a wider sense of need for change in Australian society, and not just because of a more widespread opinion of terraces houses as a “common problem.” Luckins notes the link that was made in the 1960s between the new migrants’ culture and a growing sense of the inner city as ‘cosmopolitan.’ As she describes it;

It was, it could be said, a “rediscovery” of Continental Europe. And in an important sense, it was far removed from Melbourne’s dominant British Protestant political structure and social fabric, and was an alternative to the competing claims of British sentimental ties American cultural and political influence, as well as the ‘White Australia’ immigration policy (Luckins 2009, 268).

This notion of the cosmopolitan was also related to ideas about modernity and diversity. Diversity (of people, food, drink, buildings) was, for perhaps the first time in Australian history, something to be celebrated, at least on the surface. Into the 1970s, even architectural historians seemed open the idea that migrants’ alterations to old houses might have worth;

... we all know of the Mediterranean colour schemes which these migrants have favoured when allowed free rein. Many would argue that these Mediterranean renovations have their own value and interest, but I do not want to debate what is essentially a question of subjective opinion (Lewis 1978, 96).

Some commentators were quite emphatic about the cultural value of immigrant settlement, and also noted that their cultures had become integral to the overall identity of the area. The notion of urban planning as a means of social and cultural sustainability was even mooted.

... if you bought in to, say, Richmond with the expectation of having an urban or a certain mix of population there in terms of the percentage of Greeks and labourers and so forth, then you should be able to complain to the planning authority if you think there are too many trendies moving into the area. There could be a “Trendy Appeals Board”, where you could go and put your case and so you could envisage having advertisements for houses saying, “Migrants only” (Jones 1978, 42).

Needless to say, no such local government body was ever formed, and a search for similar sentiments in any Australian municipality's present heritage documents is likely to prove fruitless. However these two arguments, both presented at a 1978 conference on the 'problem' of the inner Suburbs, do show a distinct shift in emphasis from earlier opinions made in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960s, the Victorian-era cottages of Richmond and other Australian inner suburbs had not yet been valued by elites. Modernity was valued, and so the forms and details of old buildings required modernisation. Alterations by migrants were freely allowed, both because they correlated with this prevalent mode of thinking, and because their alterations were made to building stock and neighbourhoods ascribed little worth. Since the 1970s, the previous diversity of cultures and classes in Richmond is being diluted as the proportion of residents who are working-class and/or immigrant has been in steady decline. Many of the second and third generations of inner suburban migrant settlers have dispersed into the middle and outer suburbs. New migrants, if they do not find accommodation in the remaining blocks of inner suburban Housing Commission blocks, are now more likely to settle on the fringes of Australia's cities. The 'trendies' mentioned by Jones who were enjoying this notion of the cosmopolitan were also the first wave of what has come to be seen as the gentrification process, as the middle-classes revised their previously pejorative views on the inner suburbs, and returned to renovate and inhabit their building stock. What has happened since the 1970s is an increasing ambivalence towards the post-war alterations of buildings, concurrent with the rise of conservation movements, and paradoxically, also concurrent with the rise of multiculturalism as a legitimate expression of Australian identity. Both these movements perhaps explain the increasing emphasis on the identities and cultures of those seen to be making alterations to inner suburban buildings. Thus, while the first passage is neutral and the second openly sympathetic, both of the comments from the 1978 *Inner Suburbs* conference identify the recently immigrant sector of the community as *other*, and so the altered built environment is now identified with this *other* identity. More broadly, this shift in emphasis can be related to the idea that value is socially and culturally constructed. Battles over identity are really claims for legitimacy, which are ultimately settled according to relations of power. It can be argued, using Bourdieu's definitions of capital, that the accrual of *cultural capital* by particular forms, emblems or motifs is dependent on their adoption by cultural elites (which in the Australian context, turns out to be not that different in the 2010s to what it was in the 1960s) (Bourdieu 1993). By the 1980s, the cultural capital of these buildings' forms, styles, and motifs had been enhanced by the *social capital* of cultural elites, and so had become invested with *symbolic capital*. The corollary of this process has been the that migrant alterations to building became gradually stripped of cultural capital as the dominant culture's views on built heritage have changed, and 'modernisation' of Victorian- and Edwardian-era buildings has not only become strongly identified with Southern European migrants, but also viewed increasingly pejoratively.

AN 'ARCHEOLOGICAL' PERSPECTIVE

New architecture, particularly in suburbs of Victorian- and Edwardian-era origins, has to negotiate with planners' definitions of 'neighbourhood character.' With new buildings, may be a matter of negotiating scale and materials, but for alterations and additions to old buildings, the difference is stark between what was encouraged in 1960 and what is allowable in 2011. With the increasing interest in restoration and

renovation of Australia's Victorian- and Edwardian-era building stock, since the 1970s, national, state and local Conservation studies have, apart from identifying buildings in areas that they consider worthy of conservation, set out guidelines for the restoration of old buildings, specifying materials, details and paint colours deemed suitable for the buildings of particular eras (City of Richmond 1985, 81). A result of this many Victorian- and Edwardian-era cottages and terrace houses have been restored according to these studies' criteria, taken back, as it were to their 'original' states, or chronologically determined approximations thereof. What is emphasised is the importance of the original, taking what has been described as an 'archaeological' perspective on the built heritage and architectural conservation (Worthing and Bond 2008, 93). Applying a Victorian-era sense of propriety to buildings, applying overt modernity to a terrace house or inner-city cottage is now only acceptable when it is hidden from public view. The corollary of this movement towards restoration is that previous alterations of a different nature, i.e., modernising the front of a Victorian cottage - are now anathema to what is considered to be good heritage practice.

For Richmond, the base document for evaluating the area's built heritage is *The Richmond Conservation Study* of 1985. This document determines the following; "... imitation bricks, imitation stone facing, imitation roofing tiles and aluminium or plastic weatherboards are not convincing and detract from the authentic overall appearance of a building," and furthermore; "... weatherboards should not be finished in brick, imitation or real" (City of Richmond 1985, 82). Also, "ALTERED WINDOW OPENINGS are generally assessed as 'Extremely inappropriate', and "In all cases, where visible from the street, the original windows should be retained or reinstated" (1985, 84). Similar comments are made about veranda alterations, front fences and other additions (1985, 86). In 1998 the City of Yarra (a municipality that merged the old City of Richmond with other neighbouring local councils) published a *Thematic Study* (updated in 2007) and this sometimes acknowledges post-war buildings or alterations to buildings, but still ascribes them little importance (City of Yarra 1998). The municipalities designated 'Urban Conservation Areas' are defined by the prevalence of un-altered, or 'appropriately' restored older buildings.

However, judgment of an altered building is not just an aesthetic appraisal of physical and material characteristics. The history of building, and the history of altering buildings, are histories of identity. The construction, alteration, and replacement of buildings have social and cultural significance – to particular sectors of society – and, as well as general trends, their worth as architecture cannot be disentangled from their identification with the sector of society that is associated with them;

... a building can symbolically represent the development and or values of particular factions and therefore play a positive role in reinforcing notions of community identity. However, it can have the opposite effect, and polarise and exclude by reinforcing and validating a particular view of the past (Worthing and Bond 2008, 49).

The re-occupation of the inner suburbs by 1970s 'trendies' and their descendents has not just been a reappraisal of the advantages of inner-city living. It is also a re-assertion of middle-class Anglo-Australian identity, and identity which is now associated with restoration of the old pre-multicultural Australia. Melbourne architect Dianne Peacock argues that 'middle class taste culture' is what has driven the erasure of migrants' inner suburban alterations to buildings and that "despite any rhetoric of cultural diversity, [heritage controls] continue to preserve and reproduce

almost exclusively, a select built heritage of the prevailing culture”(Peacock 2002, 12). In Australia there still remains the spectre of the unitary nation, with its assumptions about clearly defined and defended territories of identity and belonging. Multiculturalism may have added respect for other cultures that might exist within the nation, but the degree to which these cultures can be affective agents within Australian society remains subject to debate (Gunew 1994; Jayasuriya 1997).

“BETWEEN ESSENCE AND FRAGMENTATION”

With the gentrification of the suburb, Richmond has become, for the first time since the early days of white settlement, one of Melbourne’s more desirable places to live, and the proportion of migrants amongst its population has declined. Attitudes towards architectural heritage, as noted earlier in this paper, might be considered tangible evidence of this demographic change (as are the suburb’s many new townhouses and apartment buildings), as much as the intrinsic value of particular buildings. The desire for preservation, like the desire for demolition, is not based on objective criteria. Creating a dynamic environment and retaining a sense of history demands both change and conservation, but the question, in a diversified and multicultural society, is how (and who) should decide what is significant about the architecture of the past, and the architecture of the present. *Whose* history, or histories, should be preserved, especially when there are conflicting needs and interests? Such contestations have their parallels in other parts of the world, especially in countries whose populations have become increasingly diversified through recent immigration. The cultural and architectural critic Kazi Ashraf has noted; ‘The new battle ground is not merely between East and West, but between essence and fragmentation” (Ashraf 2006, 66).

As noted at the beginning of this paper, the UNESCO resolutions argue that cultural sustainability is not just a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but an ongoing dialogue between a locality and its people (Nadarajah and Yamamoto 2007). Complicating this, however, by definition, dialogue involves two definable entities, and so implies a degree of consensus over of what constitutes the identities of both. The nature of the architecture discussed in this paper suggests that this equation is more complex, that given a diverse populace, definitions of local identity can also be plural and contestable. This does not completely negate the usefulness of the UNESCO definition, but does indicate that older definitions of cultures as discrete entities still resonate within its conceptualisations of cultural heritage. If multiculturalism is to be more than a governmental mechanism for societal harmony, but a means for a more diversified audience for architecture, then it is important that a way between essence and fragmentation is needed to ensure that sustaining the built culture of one part of a diverse society does not mean the erasure of others.

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