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Centres on the Edge: Multicultural Built Environments in Melbourne

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Negotiating the insertion of new types of buildings into existing urban environments is often the cause of contestation, as they are usually judged on the degree of their departure from what are considered to be original elements. The architectural interventions of recent immigrant groups are particularly problematic in this respect, especially if they have overt religious or cultural content and expression (eg. places of worship). As well as the more usual disputes about overlooking, site coverage or increased noise, they must contend with the privileging of the Anglo-Celtic original (indigenous culture notwithstanding). The architectural impact of non Anglo-Celtic societies and cultures on Melbourne have thus been mainly considered in terms of how built others might be assimilated into existing environments rather than on how they might transform them. To consider these issues, this paper will provide an empirical insight into an edge condition of cultural difference by concentrating on recent developments in Greater Dandenong, a municipality in metropolitan Melbourne that is statistically its most ethnically diverse. It will look at developments in Springvale South and Keysborough where buildings identified with a wide range of immigrant communities have been established recently, including Buddhist temples, Orthodox Churches and Mosques. As these examples portray, the cultural products of immigrants do alter the physical and social fabric of the city. They question, as Ghassan Hage has contended, the degree to which whiteness can continue as the unspoken centre of Australian identity and the benchmark from which social interactions, products or spatial relationships should be judged (Hage 1998: 18). In a current political and social situation that is somewhat fraught for those of us with a positive interest in a multicultural future, examination of the changing built environment in Australia constitutes a vital component in understanding the development of contemporary Australian identity.

As the architectural theorist Iain Chambers puts it, the raw materials of architecture... that seemingly furnish the conclusion of a discourse, a project, a plan, a building, a city, are merely material points of departure as architectural space is rendered into place, is transformed into historical practices and cultural apertures: into an irrepressible series of languages, bodies, acts, and provocation. (Chambers 2001: 418).

In other words what is proposed by a building in its design is not the same as what is produced as its physical and spatial reality acts and is acted on, the people and the place where it is situated. As such buildings might be described as performative, in that it is through their interaction that they can be understood. They are not autonomous objects, but active constituents being shaped by, and then shaping, society. A work of architecture

is, as Dutton & Hurst Mann (1996: 1) suggest, an epistemological project. Architecture intervenes, maps and signifies and in doing so it constructs identities. It helps to shape how we know the world by mediating power, social relations and cultural values. Events such as the settlement, inhabitation and establishment of communities involve the occupation of space. Architecture provides the armature of this space, its form and its image. Thus context is critical, not in the narrow definition of fitting into surrounding styles and forms, but in understanding how architecture emerges out of its surroundings and then transforms them. More broadly in terms of this conference's theme of everyday multiculturalism, our urban environment is an arena where issues such as values, identity and difference are played out in tangible ways every day. Thus the built environment can give us clues to how our society is developing that do not arise out of the mouths of politicians, lobbyists or media barons, but from Australian people carrying on with their lives in proximity and negotiation with other Australian people. By looking at built developments in Australian cities, we can develop a clearer picture of what this might mean for the nation's multicultural future.

One area where such developments might be most acutely observed is the City of Greater Dandenong, a municipality in the outer south-east of Melbourne. Situated 33 kilometres south-east of the Melbourne CBD, 54% of the City's population 133,000 were born outside Australia, as compared to the Victoria-wide average of 25% (City of Greater Dandenong 2006). In particular, the area has become a centre for the settlement of Vietnamese, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Lao, and more recently Sudanese and Afghan migrants.¹ Additionally, Greater Dandenong has the lowest median household income in Melbourne at \$841 per week (State of Victoria 2006). This should remind us that economic and class opportunities are also critical factors in settlement and the development of built environments. Negotiation of building procurement and establishment processes requires knowledge about, and access to, hierarchies of power and influence. As Jayasuriya has suggested, the rubric of Australian multiculturalism has a tendency to use 'culture' as the trope through which all aspects of ethnic community life are understood, and this tends to elide other types of difference (Jayasuriya 1997: 2). Nevertheless, Greater Dandenong does provide a useful empirical insight into how cultural differences are being negotiated, and the role of architecture in the process. The following images and description provide a brief illustration.



Figure 1. Butcher, Dandenong



Figure 2. Shops, Springvale

One of the most obvious signs of multicultural settlement in the built environment is the existence of shops and other businesses catering for different ethnic groups (Figures 1 and 2). These are noticeable in a number of locations in the City of Greater Dandenong, most notably in Dandenong itself (Indian, Pakistani, Fijian), in Noble Park (Bosnian) and especially in Springvale (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao).



Figure 3. Wat Dhammaran Lao Buddhist Temple, Springvale



Figure 4. Cambodian Community Centre, Springvale

Another noticeable phenomenon is the presence of small Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Sri Lankan temples in the municipality's residential areas. A majority of these have been set up within existing dwellings.² The addition of symbols, signs and ritual elements indicate sometimes subtle, and sometimes emphatic transformations of usage. There are also several buildings that house ethnically-based community groups, though with a few notable exceptions (Figure 4) these are not as physically distinctive.

Apart from residences themselves, the cultural characteristics of which would constitute another study, these examples represent the most evident alterations to the built environment in established areas of Greater Dandenong. However, there are also substantial parts of the municipality that until the last ten or fifteen years had remained undeveloped or rural land. It is in these areas that a number of architectural developments have been constructed that clearly demonstrate the ways in which demographic changes have led to the need for new types of buildings.



Figure 5. Hoa Nghiem Vietnamese Buddhist temple gate



Figure 6. Bright Moon Chinese Buddhist temple

One such area is a strip of Springvale Road and its environs south of Springvale's business centre. While residentially zoned, frontage on a busy main road and the proximity to the council tip meant that this area had been little developed for housing. However, several substantial new religious buildings have been recently constructed here. In quick succession, you can pass by a Vietnamese Buddhist temple (Figure 5), a Cambodian Buddhist temple and a half-constructed Chinese Buddhist temple (Figure 6), through which you can glimpse another Cambodian Buddhist temple in the background.



Figure 7. Dhamma Sarana Sri Lankan Buddhist temple,



Figure 8. Serbian Orthodox Church, Keysborough
seen from gate of Polish Catholic Church, Keysborough

Another area that has recently seen the construction of new religious buildings within the municipality is a semi-rural part of the suburb of Keysborough.³ Existing uses in this area include market gardening, horse agistment and other remnant farming uses. To these have now been added a number of new religious buildings for different communities. Amongst others, these include a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple, a Turkish Mosque/School and Community Centre, a Polish Catholic Church and a Serbian Orthodox Church.

On the surface, what has resulted is a fascinating patchwork of religions and ethnicised spaces laid onto the flat Australian landscape. In Keysborough, you can survey a number of different world-views from a single vantage point. While all these buildings represent particular ethnic and theological constituents, apparently within their own supra-national, supra-religious spaces, they also coexist collectively. This coexistence suggests a number of aspects to these buildings that might be productively studied, including the implications of demographic change on local planning and the translation of architectural symbols through migration and their place within the discourse of Australian architecture. While I do not wish to elide such aspects here, for reasons of space I would like to concentrate on the implications of these buildings in terms of multiculturalism.

So what the resultant environment can tell us about multicultural settlement? Firstly, the marginality of siting of these new buildings is significant. This suggests that while commercial zones within cities might be relatively amenable to cultural shifts (the specifics of goods and services may change but the nature of retailing or commerce does not), established residential or institutional areas tend to be more resistant. Only those

alterations that are unobtrusive both visually and in terms of usage tend to be permitted, hence the small-scale conversions of residences into temples and community centres.⁴ In Bourdieuian terms, in residential areas perceptions of habitus - the network of predispositions that reinforce and tacitly inform everyday action - are strong, even without being complicated by cultural, racial or religious factors (Bourdieu 1985). Remnant land such as in Springvale South and Keysborough, in contrast, has fewer competing demands, and thus a weaker sense of habitus, and so the appearance of newness (such as new types of building) are less prone to be seen as confrontational. The construction of new Buddhist temples in these areas might thus be seen, following de Certeau's use of the term as tactical, employed both to resist the strategies of hegemonic or dominant forces (such as governmental planning), and to imagine alternatives that might coexist with them (de Certeau 1988). This is a point more recently made in relation to multiculturalism by Sneja Gunew, who suggests that rights to a particular place for those not 'naturally' belonging to that place remain provisional (Gunew 2004: 96).

In other writings, I have taken the liberty of adopting one of Ghassan Hage's terms and referred to buildings seen here as being 'third world-looking buildings' (Hage 1998: 18, Beynon 2005), implying that despite their evident presence in the Australian built environment, they are considered to belong elsewhere. Moreover, that elsewhere is outside the civilisational lineage that Australia imagines itself belonging to. This labelling was also intended to provide comment on the place of these buildings within Australia's built environment in the context of an almost complete lack of interest in them from writers and critics on Australian architecture. Part of this lack of interest seems to be derived from the assumption that we (the Australian architectural readership) are not the users and inhabitants of these buildings. This attitude is symptomatic of a tendency to regard the impact of non-Anglo-Celtic societies and cultures upon Australia - despite years of diverse immigration and multiculturalism - mainly in terms of how others might be integrated into a pre-existing and presumably homogenous society rather than how they might transform it. A more conspiratorial aspect of this attitude is the tendency to see the appearance of ethnically-based shops, businesses and places of worship as the co-option of parts of Australia for other kinds of identity. In an environment that was previously mostly Anglo-Celtic, Buddhist temples and Orthodox churches are distinctive. They introduce new forms, images, symbols and signs to the city. While superficially this is the realm of the orientally 'exotic', the appearance of images that are foreign and thus carrying with them connotations both excitement and threat, the fact that many of these buildings are places of worship is significant. Religious buildings are markers for sets of distinctive cultural traits, beliefs and customs. Their use of overt symbolism (crosses, crescents) and distinctive forms (domes, spires, pointed arches) imply an allegiance to not just particular sets of beliefs, but also in some cases specific cultures and geographic locations. They suggest the presence of communities for whom both quotidian and spiritual points of reference are different. As such, they suggest the presence of the other in a more fundamental manner and therefore present a greater challenge to the status quo than exotic grocers or restaurants.

Such opinions imply a particular positionality – one in which an assumedly ‘authentic’ Australian identity is in a position to judge other identities as being un-Australian. As Hage has outlined, that such a line of thought should still be prevalent suggests that while rights to Australian citizenship may have broadened to include categories of people who in previous times were considered ineligible, their increasing presence in Australia hasn’t really shifted perceptions of what it means to be Australian (Hage 1998: 19). Whiteness and particular forms of Christianity remain at the core of Australian-ness and while others may become part of the Australian nation, this remains conditional on their deferral to the implied characteristics of this core. Such phenomena as the debate on current Australian values illustrate this clearly, suggesting not only that there is a homogenous (and white) centre of knowledge, belief and social interaction, but that this centre has attributes not shared by others.

However if we Australians are the local inhabitants of a place such as Greater Dandenong, demography suggests that this is not something that can be assumed. As noted earlier, non English-as-a-first-language, born-outside-Australia residents are collectively in the majority. However no ethnic group constitutes more than 10% of the population (City of Greater Dandenong 2006). Thus if we are talk of architectural or cultural identity, let alone values, we might ask whose identity we are talking about. As the area develops, what is becoming apparent is that there are a multiplicity of cultural histories at work in every building, alteration, and land subdivision. Buildings such as those shown here are not peripheral to the nature of the local built environment, they are central to the ways in which this part of Australian suburbia is evolving. A more progressive (and realistic) view would thus be to embrace the diversity of buildings that have appeared and developed within the area and accept that they constitute multicultural Australian architecture in the making. This implies also the acceptance of their multitude of pasts as ingredients for local architectural culture. In this regard Hage makes a pertinent comment on the notion of heritage in a multicultural nation in his book on Arab-Australians (Hage 2000). He makes the point that a narrow territorial definition of identity is inadequate when the population derives a large part of their history from other places. These other places, the ‘towns and villages from which Australia’s migrant population has originated’ provide ingredients that constitute the multicultural present just as much as any built local built heritage (Hage 2000: 12). The lineage of each building in this polyglot environment reveals a rich mix of local and immigrant sources. These might be stylistic, structural, material or spatial, based on mixtures of traditional typologies and local materials to meet ritual and practical needs. Within each there are also the traces of national, ethnic and religious histories, of allegiances and belongings both past and present. If these can be read, then our appreciation of the unfamiliar forms of these buildings may increase, and more importantly, the means by which the histories of other places, other cultures are being imprinted on the Australian landscape.

The Dhamma Sarana Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in the Keysborough (Figures 9 and 10, and pictured in the background of Figure 7.) provides an example of this. This appears as an unremarkable small building, with rendered walls and a pitched metal-deck roof, in construction and scale not far removed from the domestic buildings of nearby housing

estates. What distinguishes it from them are certain elements of its composition, most notably the octagonal front pavilion of the main building and the large white *stupa* on the site. Together these elements provide an illustration of how religion, ethnicity and culture are embodied in the architecture of the temple.



Figure 9. Front Pavilion, Dhamma Sarana, Keysborough.



Figure 10. Stupa, Dhamma Sarana, Keysborough.

The name Dhamma Sarana provides some explicit references to this. *Dhamma* refers to the Truth or Law as taught by the Buddha, whereas *Sarana* refers to the three Refuges (*Ti-Sarana*) of Buddhism; reverence for the Buddha, adherence to the *Dhamma*, and membership of the *Sangha* – the community of Buddhists. Correspondingly, the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and the *Sangha* are each embodied within specific components of the temple, which might be more properly described as a *vihara* (temple-monastery), as it also serves as a residence for Buddhist monks. The element that most closely represents the Buddha is the *stupa*. Typical of its type, the stupa at the Dhamma Sarana is a solid, hemispherical structure. While it does not, as some of its antecedents are purported to, contain actual relics of the Buddha, the stupa is a critical element, " . . . the law (*Dhamma*) made visible, the mystical, architectonic body of the Buddha" (Eliade 1985: 135). Adherence to the *Dhamma* is satisfied by the room contained within the octagonal front of the main building. This is the *patimaghara* or image-house, in which Buddha images, as well as subsidiary ritual items and offerings are housed. The presence of the Buddha through his images reminds the worshipper of the message of the *Dhamma*, which is then reinforced by monastic teachings, rituals and advice to the lay community. It is the ecclesiastical part of the *vihara*, the space in which the monks assemble, worship, meditate, consult texts or preach the *dhamma*. The rest of the building provides physical accommodation for the *Sangha*, in the form of living, cooking and sleeping spaces.

Bandaranayake (1974) describes each of the ritual forms of the *vihara* as conforming to the nature of the objects that they house or commemorate. As such, the stupa is generally circular and the *patimaghara* is usually square (symbolic of its status as a 'residential' space for the Buddha). While the Dhamma Sarana's stupa conforms to its ritual shape, the image room is octagonal, and it is through this form that more complex cultural and political meanings might be read into the building. This is because while octagonal forms are unusual in *viharas*, an octagonal pavilion is part of the pre-eminent religious site in Sri Lanka, the Dalada Maligawa, or Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, so named because it

traditionally houses a tooth from the Buddha himself. While it might not be surprising that the Dhamma Sarana should derive its form from such an eminent source, what is intriguing is that the octagonal pavilion or *pattirippuwa* at the front of the Dalada Maligawa has no Buddhist symbolic or ritual purpose. The *pattirippuwa* was a late addition to the temple, added by Sri Vikrama Rajasinha - the last king of Kandy prior to colonial control of the island - for the purposes of allowing the royal party to watch the celebrations in front of the temple (Seneviratne 1978: 22). Seneviratne describes the Dalada as being the 'legitimiser of political power' for Sinhalese kings, who participated in public rituals there to reinforce their terrestrial authority, and while this is no longer so directly the case, the Dalada Maligawa continues to embody a potent combination of terrestrial and divine power. New governments visit it after being sworn in, and foreign delegations are also taken there, as an integral part of inter-governmental interaction (Seneviratne 1978: 121). For this reason, the appearance of the octagon-plan in a Sri Lankan-Australian Buddhist building can be interpreted on a number of levels. Firstly, the Dalada Maligawa is famous in Sri Lanka, and its octagon is prominent and unique. The shape is readily associated with Sri Lankan identity. Secondly, the Dalada Maligawa is the most revered shrine in Sri Lankan Buddhism. Thirdly, and perhaps more conjecturally, as one of the main symbols of power of past Sinhalese kings, the octagonal form can be seen to confer legitimacy on an organisation of Sri Lankan origin. As such the Dhamma Sarana's octagonal form suggests a Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition that is closely connected with Sri Lankan nationalism and Sinhalese ethnicity.

This is, however, just one example. The other buildings in this area could also be individually analysed and would each provide insights into the disparate ingredients that make up the local built environment. However the complex web of religious, ethnicised and politicised spaces that each building represents exist within a local context far removed any of their places of origin. They are all constructed within a landscape consisting of neighbours of markedly different religious, geographical and ethnic backgrounds. This means that while in a theological and cultural sense Sri Lankan Buddhists, Polish Catholics, Serbian Orthodox and Turkish Muslims in Keysborough all exist within their own spaces - maintaining their own rituals, symbolisms and orientations, their they form a continuous built landscape. A continuous built *Australian* landscape. This coexistence not only distinguishes them from similar developments in their countries of origin, but in an everyday sense makes them formative elements in something new, the physical environment for a shared Australian multicultural.

In Australia, there has always been a negotiation of identity and its relationship with place, and it has never been a simple process of arrival, settlement and adaptation to the local. Recent immigration has only provided sharper relief to this ongoing process. What is occurring on a daily basis in Keysborough and South Springvale is a complex series of negotiations between multiple communities, all of whom bring elements of their culture from their places of origin, as well as adopting elements from their new environment. The addition of still new ingredients to the mix - be they ethnic community centres, temples, mosques or some yet unknown type of building - enrich but also complicate the process of establishing local identity, and efforts to fix this identity. As migrants from a multitude of

cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds settle, they contribute to urban landscapes, not just in terms of altering or constructing particular buildings but more fundamentally by shifting the identity of places according to their particular characteristics. The heterogeneity of what is happening in the City of Greater Dandenong also suggests that this shift cannot be easily categorised as a movement towards any other singular identity. This is not a simple adaptation from one cultural or societal identity to another – as is often imagined in the media or by the present Federal government. It is not the Vietnamisation or Islamisation of the suburbs, as has sometimes been simplistically suggested, even in areas where migrants from Vietnamese or Islamic backgrounds may predominate (and as if Islam constituted a homogenous cultural identity in itself).

Whilst currently on the margins of Melbourne's metropolitan area, by their presence these buildings suggest a multiplicity of new centres. They represent an ongoing daily process of negotiation and contestation over symbolism, culture, ethnic identity and land usage that is likely become increasingly complicated as future generations continue this process. The collective built environment that evolves out of these negotiations and contestation will be the physical manifestation of how Australia develops as a multicultural nation.

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All photographs by the author.

Footnotes

¹ The opening of the Commonwealth Government Enterprise Migrant Centre in Springvale in 1970 was a major catalyst behind the current diversification of the region's population.

² In the more densely settled areas of the municipality, use of an existing premises for a 'Place of Worship' is allowable without council permission in 'Residential' and 'Mixed Use' zones, so there is no apparent problem, for instance, with setting up a temple in an existing residence, with the proviso that there are "no social or recreational activities" (Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme 2001).

³ The council refers to this area as a 'green wedge' (Keysborough Non-Urban Area: 'Green Wedge' Planning Policy 22.02: Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme 2001). The thrust of the policy for this area is on maintaining its rural character and drainage flows and preserving remnant wetland and indigenous vegetation.

⁴ While use of an existing premises for a 'Place of Worship' is allowable without council permission in 'Residential' and 'Mixed Use' zones, the sum of gross floor areas for all buildings on a site must not exceed 180 square metres: the size of a standard outer suburban house (Greater Dandenong Planning Scheme 2001). Given the integration into their communities that immigrant religious organisations are seeking, and the consequent scale of both premises and activities that they seek to provide, this caveat effectively precludes both major additions to existing premises and the construction of new ones within established areas.