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Editors

Amarewar Galla, The University of Queensland, Australia

Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

Defining Cultural Sustainability in Multicultural Built Environments

David Beynon, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Abstract: The Australian built environment is an arena where multicultural identity and difference are tangibly negotiated. What occurs on a daily basis in its cities is a complex series of negotiations between multiple communities, all of whom adapt their own cultures, as well as adopting elements from their surrounding environment. This paper investigates these issues by comparing the physical development within a contemporary Australian city with the social and cultural changes that have taken place in it. It asks the question. Whose culture should be sustained in this context, and on what basis? To what extent should the urban environment be reflecting of the changes, as much as the origins, of a relatively young settler society (notwithstanding the fact that its original inhabitants have a history that predates this settlement by thousands of years). More broadly, what constitutes cultural sustainability in a multicultural society, and how is, might, or should this be reflected in its built environment?

Keywords: Cultural Sustainability, Built Environment, Multiculturalism

A SERIES OF United Nations conferences on the relationship between culture and sustainability arrived at the 2002 Kanazawa Resolutions, making the statement that sustaining cultures in terms of contemporary life is a matter of 'dialogical coexistence' and that cultural sustainability is not just a matter of the preservation or reinvigoration of the past, but an ongoing dialogue between a locality and the people who inhabit or otherwise interact with it.¹ Cultural sustainability is inextricably linked to notions of cultural heritage,² a concept now recognised at an international level as being linked to ideas of cultural diversity, pluralism, and culture more generally as a 'fluid process of forming, expressing, and enforcing identities of individuals, social groups, or spatially constructed communities.'³ The built environment is an integral part of this spatial construction, and the history of building is a history of identity. "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."⁴ Alterations to buildings, like their original construction, involve elements and forms that relate to particular cultural and societal patterns, a process that is not without contention. As Worthing and Bond note;

... 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.

¹ Nadarajah, M. & Yamamoto, A. *Urban Crisis: Culture and the Sustainability of Cities*, UNU Press, Tokyo, (2007).

² ICOMOS, Monograph: 7th General Assembly and Symposium Rostock-Dresden, 1984, (1987 VEB, Berlin; Worthing, Derek & Bond, Stephen, *Managing Built Heritage: The Role of Cultural Significance*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 2008), pp.50-51.

³ Zukin, Sharon, *The Cultures of Cities*, (Blackwell, Cambridge, 1995), p.289.

⁴ David, Howard, *The Culture of Building*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2006), p.95.

However, it can have the opposite effect, and polarise and exclude by reinforcing and validating a particular view of the past.⁵

This idea that reinforcement of identity can be exclusive and polarising is one made by cultural critic and philosopher Ghassan Hage in relation to Australian society and its comparatively recent diversification. Hage argues that while Australia's identity is now arguably multicultural, immigrants from non-British origins still have to contend with the persistent notion that Australian culture remains a received and adapted British (English) society.⁶ In a sense, this is not surprising, given the comparatively recent (1967) repealing of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, "part of a consistent campaign to prevent anyone from contributing to Australian nation-building who was not of European descent and appearance."⁷ While this race-based national ideology has now been dismantled and discredited, Australia's ongoing retention of the Queen of England as head of State and the Union Jack on its flag, indicate that the basis for its nationhood has not fundamentally changed. Multiculturalism may have added respect for other cultures that might exist within the nation, but the allowance and even encouragement of recent immigrants to retain their own identities does not necessarily equate to a share in the 'ownership' of the national space.⁸ The complexities of multicultural identity can be seen in many of Australia's urban areas, so the built environment provides a useful subject with which to explore Hage's theories about the nature of Australian multiculturalism, as well as issues of cultural sustainability more generally.

This paper will explore this contested territory through discussion of Richmond, one of Melbourne's oldest suburbs. Richmond is an area which, like many other inner suburbs in Australia's major cities, been a place of continuous and diversified immigrant settlement. Because of this, the area provides a useful vehicle to track the impact of demographic change on the built environment and how this relates to overall definitions of an area's cultural identity. Material for this paper (apart from that derived from cited sources) was gathered from an extensive survey undertaken by the author in 2009. This survey involved photographic recording of residential buildings in Richmond, and their categorisation according to age and stylistic characteristics. These characteristics are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Richmond lies only a few kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Its land was traditionally inhabited by the Wurundjeri people. There are still remnants of their material culture such as the corroboree tree at Burnley Park near the banks of the Yarra River, once an important meeting and ceremonial place for local clans. It was founded as a colonial settlement in 1839, when Robert Hoddle, also Melbourne's surveyor, subdivided the area into farmlet allotments. By the 1850s, further subdivisions had led to the establishment of retail and commercial strips on Bridge Road and Swan Street, its two main east-west thoroughfares.

⁵ Worthing, D. & Bond, S., *Managing Built Heritage: The Role of Cultural Significance*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 2008), p.49.

⁶ Stratton J. & Ang, I. 'Multicultural Imagined Communities', D. Bennett (ed.). *Multicultural States: Rethinking difference and identity*, (London, Routledge, 1998). Docker J. & Fischer, G., 'Adventures of Identity' in J. Docker & G. Fischer [Eds.] *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2000).

⁷ Jupp, J. *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁸ Hage, G. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, Pluto, 1998), Gunew, S. *Haunted Nations: The colonial dimensions of multiculturalisms*, (London, Routledge, 2003).

Richmond became a municipality in 1855, and by 1857 had a population of around 9,029.⁹ In these early years, there was some concentration of industry, but also a number of substantial residences were built in the prevailing Victorian styles. There are few surviving examples, including a gable-roofed brick villa at 207 Lennox Street constructed in 1855, and a pair of Victorian Gothic residences at 13-15 James Street, dating from 1857.¹⁰

Gradually Richmond developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century into a combined residential-industrial suburb. On almost three sides, its boundary was the meandering Yarra River, on the banks of which were established many of Melbourne's mills and factories. Nearly all settlers during this period were from Britain or Ireland, and as in other parts of the city, the main social distinction became that between Protestants (mostly of English descent) and the mostly Irish-descended Catholics. Richmond became a local centre for Catholicism, as Catholics made up a large number of the workers in its new factories. While a small elite of factory owners and clergy lived on Richmond Hill, the suburb's only elevated land, these workers generally lived in tiny cottages on its flood-prone flatlands. Their small houses were generally constructed, as was common across Australia at the time, of light timber framing, clad in weatherboards. These were utilitarian buildings, with decorative details like multi-paned windows and verandas with cast iron lacework confined to their narrow street frontages. As Richard Twopeny, in his 1883 account of *Town Life in Australia* noted;

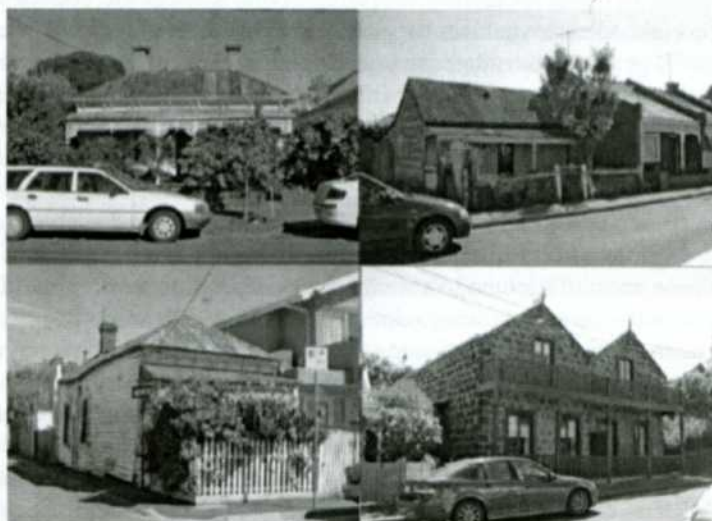


Figure 1: Victorian-era Cottages in Richmond (Bottom Right are Residences at 13-15 James Street)

⁹ O'Connor, J., O'Connor, T., Coleman, R. & Wright, H. *Richmond Conservation Study, Volume 1*, City of Richmond, Australian Heritage Commission & Ministry for Planning and Environment, Richmond, 1985, p.11.

¹⁰ *Richmond Conservation Study, Volumes 1 & 2*, City of Richmond, (Australian Heritage Commission & Ministry for Planning and Environment, Richmond 1985), Vol. 2, pp.116-117.

By far the majority of houses are built by speculators; which means that they are very badly built, run up in a tremendous hurry, constructed of the cheapest and nastiest materials, with thin walls – in short, built for show, and not for use.¹¹

As many of working-class residents living in these buildings were reduced to abject poverty by the 1930s depression, Richmond gradually became a slum district, considered to be the domain of the impoverished and the criminal.

In 1954, when a Hawthorn woman was fined £5 for failing to stop after an accident, she tendered as her defence; "My only thought was to get home safely. I was very frightened as there had been so many bandits in the Richmond district, . . . I just kept going, wanting to get out of Richmond where the bandits seem to live".¹²

The area was the focus of the slum abolition movement of the 1940s and 1950s, led by Oswald Barnett and the local *Herald* newspaper.¹³ State governments of the time agreed, and worrying about a broader population decline in Melbourne's inner suburbs, the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works' 1954 Master Plan recommended "comprehensive redevelopment" as the solution.¹⁴ For Richmond, this meant the demolition of large numbers of mostly Victorian-era houses in order to construct new public housing, the most prominent example being the high-rise towers of the North Richmond's Housing Commission estate, commenced in 1964. This thinking correlated with what was happening in many other cities of the Western world. Inner suburbs were generally considered to be undesirable places to live, and it was considered inevitable that the middle classes would abandon the older, more cramped inner parts of the city for its newer, more spacious outskirts.¹⁵ In a future where the automobile would free individuals to travel from their modern homes in safe, outer suburbia via the new infrastructure of roads and freeways to their workplaces, it was common wisdom that the inner city would be left to the underclasses and those who for some reason rejected such progress; recent migrants, low-waged workers, the aged, and a few artists and other bohemians.¹⁶

During this time, most of Richmond's wealthier residents did take the opportunity to relocate to newer suburbs on the growing edge of Melbourne's metropolitan area, and 1959 alone about a tenth of Richmond's housing stock were sold.¹⁷ Most of people who came to occupy these houses were newly arrived immigrants from southern Europe (mostly from Greece, but also from Italy, Turkey, Malta and Lebanon), settling in the area because housing was cheap and employment was nearby. The 1961 Census found that 40% of Richmond's population were southern-European-descended 'New Australians.' The area around Swan Street in south Richmond became a centre for Greek-Australian businesses, and Orthodox Churches and other culturally specific institutions were established. With the full relaxation of the infamous Immigration Act in the 1970s, settlers also began to arrive from Asia. The

¹¹ Twopeny, R., *Town Life in Australia*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973 (orig. publ. 1883), p.33.

¹² McCalman, J., *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond 1900-1965*, (Hyland House, South Melbourne, 1998), p.8.

¹³ McCalman, J., (1998), p.262.

¹⁴ Logan, W., *The Gentrification of Melbourne: A Political Geography of Inner City Housing*, (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1985), p.150.

¹⁵ Logan, W. (1985), pp.5-6.

¹⁶ Pahl, Raymond Edward, *Readings in Urban Sociology* (Pergamon, Oxford, 1968)

¹⁷ McCalman, J., (1998), p.289.

war in Vietnam provided the main influx, and Richmond, with large quantities of public housing, became one of the main locations for Vietnamese refugee settlement. The retail district of Victoria Street adjacent to this public housing has since developed into a major centre for Vietnamese-Australian commerce.

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of the gentrification of the area, as the Anglo-Celtic middle-classes gradually revised their views on the inner suburban living. This process has continued to the present-day, especially since the recovery from the 1990s recession. Now Richmond is, for the first time since the early years of its white settlement, considered to be one of Melbourne's more desirable areas in which to live. This process has, of course, led to dramatic increases in property values, with the corollary that the proportion of Richmond's residents who are working-class and/or immigrant is in gradual decline. The Vietnamese identity of north Richmond is still relatively strong (as blocks of public housing remain), many of the second and third generations of the suburb's southern European settlers have dispersed into the wider metropolitan area as they have either sold their families' properties or been priced out of the rental market.

Architectural Alterations

So what of residential buildings in this context? Do they speak of a kind of cultural dialogue, illustrative of the area's cultural and societal changes? Exploration of these questions first require a brief description of the physical and spatial changes undergone by buildings, and the correlation between these and the changing nature of settlers who have undertaken these changes.

There were a number of characteristic alterations to residences made as new migrants from Southern Europe occupied Richmond's houses in the 1950s to 1970s (Figure 2). As speculatively-built houses in an impoverished area, many buildings were in poor repair, and many of these alterations were practical. One of the most common was replacement of the narrow timber-framed front window, by wider ones framed in aluminium. The new, wider windows allowed more light into their dark interiors. Elaborate Victorian-era veranda roofs, with cast-iron lacework and curved corrugated iron roof sheeting, were often removed, and replaced by simpler structures with flat roofs supported on slim metal struts, or sometimes open pergola framing. Veranda floors, traditionally surfaced with tiles or timber boards, were replaced with concrete slabs. The new settlers also made use of the space between the house and the street (if any) for food plants; tomatoes, grapes, lemons. They grew grape vines on the new lightly-framed porches, which provided shade in summer, and sun penetration in winter. The dilapidated weatherboards covering the exterior walls might be clad in a skin of brickwork, which both protected deteriorated areas, and also gave buildings a more modern aspect, one that appealed to settlers used to more solid building traditions.



Figure 2: Victorian-era Cottages Altered by Post-war Migrants in Richmond

Where this was impractical or too expensive, aluminium siding panels, or cement-sheet cladding with imitation-brick patterning were used. To modernise masonry houses, elaborate parapets were removed, and exterior walls painted white or in pale colours. Some houses were completely demolished, and their replacements were mostly constructed in the prevailing brick veneer style of 1950s Australian outer suburbia. This style tended to be austere in detail, with exterior walls of salmon or cream brick, wide aluminium-framed windows, characteristically on the front corners of the house, and shallow-pitched cement-tiled roofs. Often the layout was 'double-' or 'triple-fronted', with the first 'front' or bay containing the main living area, with the front door housed in a second 'front' set further back.

However, on larger plots of land, grander residences were constructed that expressed more fully the aesthetic and material preferences of their inhabitants (Figure 3). These were often double-storey, again constructed of brick, but made more imposing by the addition of front verandas or balconies, framed with brick arches or columns cast in concrete to emulate Greek or Roman antecedents. Similarly, concrete balustrading to stairs and balconies mimicked Classical forms. Decorative concrete eagles, lions or other heroic beasts placed atop gateposts would complete an impression of solidity, grandeur and material success.

