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Big banana and little Italy: multicultural planning and urban design in Australia

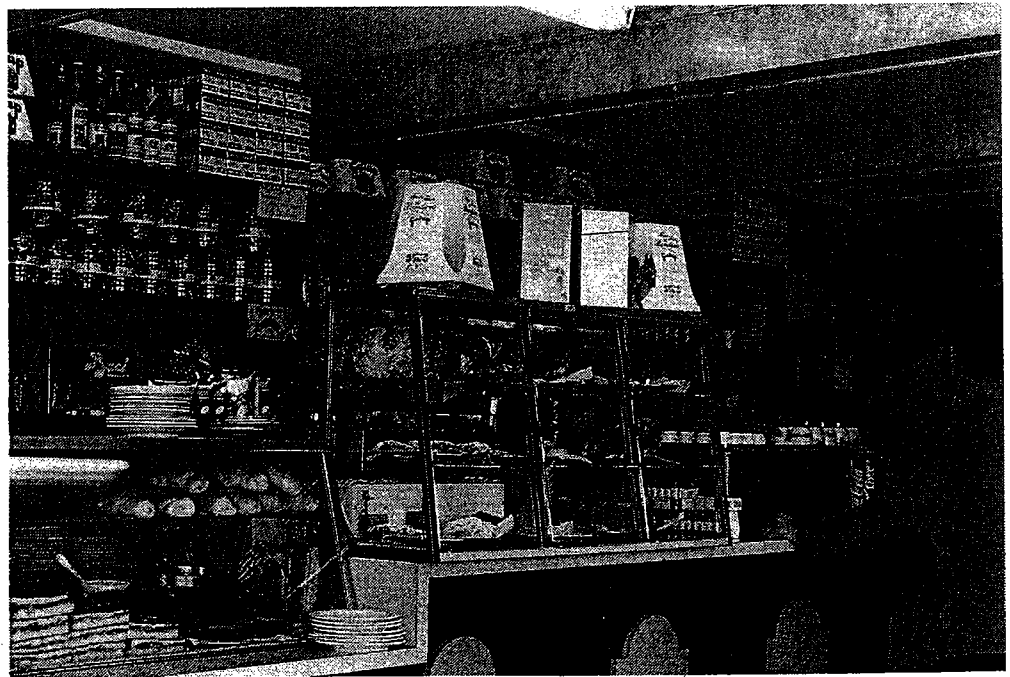
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What is the relationship between multicultural life and urban design? Australia as a multicultural society is a brave social experiment but this is insufficiently reflected either in its cultural life or in the design of public and private spaces.

What are the images which spring to mind when trying to evoke the identity of Australia as a place: the big red rock at the heart of the land asking to be climbed; pubs full of blonde, clean-cut, middle-class, Anglo, macho youths, arms around one another's shoulders, jockeying for a beer; sunburnt farmers with wrinkles around their eyes scanning a vast agricultural horizon, not a tree in sight, just hectares of wheat or sheep conquering a flat, featureless landscape under a burning sun; limitless stretches of sandy beach rimmed with resort hotels, nightclubs, spas and casinos; highway facilities for travellers in the form of massive replicas of Ned Kelly, Big Bananas, Big Merinos, Big Prawns squatting by the highway offering a refreshment pause from somewhere to elsewhere.

These models of Australian cultural identity are being pedalled through advertising and tourism—Australians as gold miners, bush rangers, land grabbers, big banana/prawn/pineapple consumers, greedy people hungry for conquest. But what of the rich, invisible, spatial, cultural heritage of Australia's more recent immigrant groups? When we talk of cultural planning and the urban environment how much do we think in terms of anything other than Anglo and American models?

Australian public and private space, almost without exception, was designed on a British colonial model until the advent of inter-



national modernism in the twentieth century with its cultural source in urban America. The form of the city was shaped around a notion of public life which was established by migrants from Britain. Despite the demographic changes wrought by immigration from a multitude of other countries, there has been little acknowledgement of this in urban design.

In the cities, corporate property owners and government bodies demonstrate little sense of civic responsibility towards citizens. The vast suburbs seeping further and further into the countryside provide a way of life which is deeply culturally stifled. Small towns lose a sense of identification with their public spaces and, concomitantly, public life diminishes. The communal heart is not a set of public meeting places rich in cultural experience, social opportunity and informal exchanges of goods and services, but the huge impersonal shopping complex surrounded by hectares of car parks, where public access and activity is controlled by the corporate owners, geographically and spiritually remote from the community of users.

The prevailing desire by older Australian settlers of British origin is still to quell any expression of cultural difference through assimilation. 'When they come here they have to accept our ways.' Even within the notion of multiculturalism is contained the implication of a teeth-gritting tolerance of cultural difference rather than the pleasure of a marketplace for trading ideas, skills, knowledges, experiences and feelings. This effectively obliterates behavioural patterns, rituals, customs, beliefs and values which are dependent on, and inspire the form of, these spatial arrangements. The public celebration of shared values and forms of expression is lost in the new country—a country which promised so much wealth and health and peace.

So what spatial and physical evidence is there of NESB migrant presence: the cultural inheritance of China, Italy, Greece, Vietnam, Lebanon, Chile to name but a few? The lack of detailed research on this subject is a demonstration of the prevailing attitude of myopia. Without this evidence it is difficult to distinguish common spatial and aesthetic characteristics because factors of ethnicity are only one determinant. It is important to resist the temptation to cite obvious and stereotypical examples which have become part of the folklore of prejudice. However, it is possible to indicate sites which would bear further investigation.

In addressing this question I have not attempted to include a consideration of the traditions of Aboriginal land use and custodianship or environmental design based on Aboriginal forms of expression. This should be considered in relation to the contents of this chapter, but is another enormously complex issue in its own right.

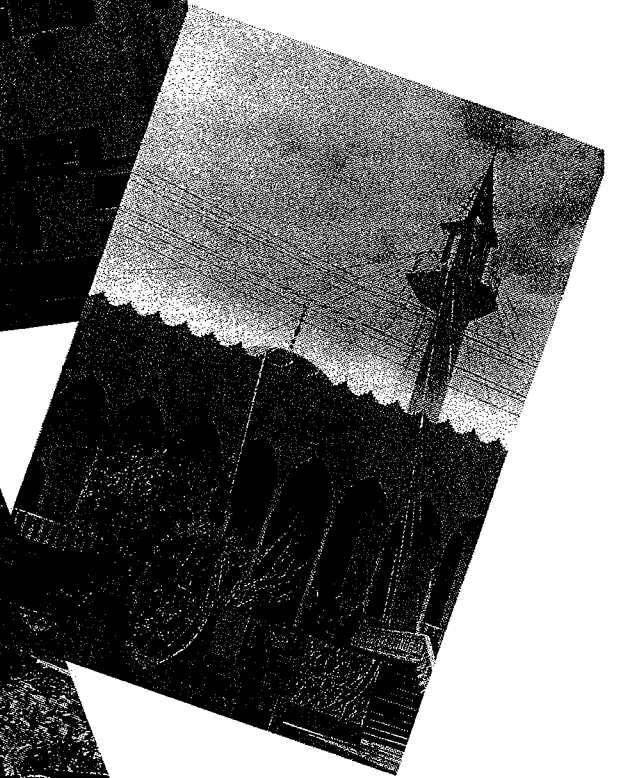
Physical expression of cultural difference

In the older suburbs where many NESB migrants first settle, they often annoy heritage conservationists by seemingly failing to respect the restoration and modification conventions adopted by many Anglo-Australians. If they opt for large aluminium framed windows, bright colours and paved outdoor spaces, this is regarded by some as an assault on the cultural heritage of Australia. However recent and borrowed these conventions might be, they are currently regarded as expressive of Australian cultural identity. The more ostentatious new houses such as the Villa Romas of Fremantle and many areas of western Sydney such as Bosley Park, with their terrazzo entrance atriums, full-bellied balustraded fences and balconies, Corinthian colonnades (vast stolid mansions proclaiming newly acquired wealth and the Mediterranean connections) have reached the stage of acceptance as a legitimate Australian suburban style.

Home interiors, styles of furniture, fittings, furnishings, objects for display and ornaments from the country of origin, extended family living arrangements, religious shrines, facilities for preparing food and entertaining, personal and household cleanliness are the context for distinctive forms of cultural expression. Because they remain largely in the 'private' realm they are less confrontational.

Particularly among migrants of working-class and peasant origin, open space surrounding houses is often used as a social vantage point. The front area, including balconies, may have seats where older people will sit and claim social territory right out into the street by chatting to neighbours or passers-by to exchange pleasantries, banter, gossip and local news. Outdoor spaces can also be the site for family and social gatherings and the enjoyment of traditional food and forms of entertainment. Among longer term Australian residents, the sociality of neighbourhoods has been diminished through increased mobility, household mechanisation and communication and entertainment technology. Casual social contact and community networking is a tradition which seems to have disappeared since the 1950s as has the practice of being responsible for the cleanliness of the street beyond the property boundary.

Decorative or productive planting in either the front or back garden is often an indicator of ethnicity, both in style and type. At certain times in Australian history, back gardens were frequently used partly or wholly for food production. This tradition is often continued in the present by migrants from rural backgrounds with the type of produce a clue to ethnicity (for example, the lovingly tended rows of vines, capsicum, eggplant, olive trees beloved of Mediterranean peoples). At the Richmond housing estate in Melbourne, the



Vietnamese–Australian tenants have established the equivalent of English allotments, domestic market gardens which provide both a source of food and a social centre for many low-income families.

The role of NESB migrants in the establishment of certain types of agriculture can be recognised in examples such as the vineyards of the (former) Yugoslavians around the Swan region of Western Australia and the market gardens which were a Chinese preserve on the edge of the city of Melbourne. Until the 1950s, the Chinese vegetable carts would bring fresh produce from the market gardens into the suburbs. Supplying a direct sales service from horse-drawn carts, they formed part of the daily marketing routine for housewives before the advent of supermarkets.

In many cultures, the street is a place for commerce, social and recreational pursuits and for festivals. There may be displays of fresh food and other goods (all beautifully arranged at the very front of shops without a barrier of glass), street vendors' stalls and people offering all kinds of goods and services, art and entertainment. There may be seats which are either associated with cafes and restaurants or are simply there for people to observe the theatre of life and the tradition of the promenade where young and old stroll together at dusk to meet friends and neighbours—definitely dressed to be seen. Shared rituals and celebrations are enacted on the public stage. These forms of cultural animation are the expression of the identities of the city's denizens. They indicate that the streets belong to the people.

In some areas of Australian inner cities, permits have been given which allow restaurants to spill out onto the pavement; recent planning for the city of Melbourne resulted in the widening of pavements in the 'Greek' precinct to create this Mediterranean atmosphere. In streets in Chinatown at the weekend there are masseurs, portrait sketchers and flute players with prerecorded full orchestral backing. Malls are being designed in many areas with this sort of activity in mind. The '*passagiata*' is alive and well in places such as Marrickville Road in Sydney or Lygon Street in Melbourne. This creates an atmosphere of excitement and unlimited potential, different from traditional Australian street behaviour which has been relatively austere.

In the last few years, local markets have increasingly become part of the weekend's recreational pursuits in Australia. These markets are not so much on the streets but are usually in church or school yards; the Asian Market on the seashore in Darwin is probably the most developed and extensive food and craft market in Australia and has become a much loved feature of life at the Top End.

One of the desired features of the cultural 'ghettos' in Australia is the specialist shopping. They offer culturally distinctive food, clothing, household goods and services provided by professionals

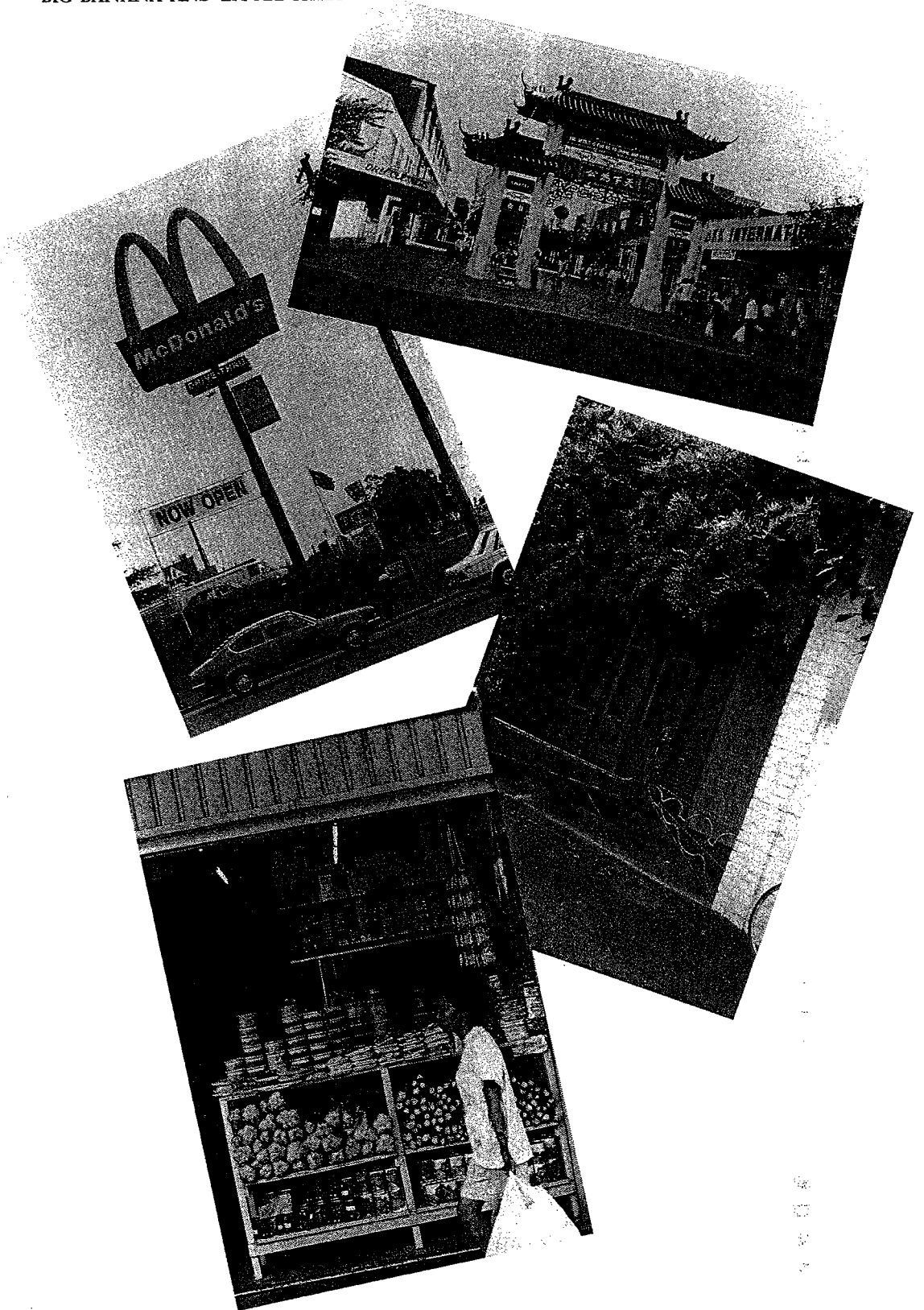
who speak the language of the particular ethnic group. These ethno-specific shopping areas are becoming increasingly popular for out-of-the-area shoppers and as tourist-destinations. At Cabramatta in Sydney's west, Fairfield Council passed legislation which required Asian features to be used on new retail and commercial building facades, and the mall has a traditional Chinese archway, statuary and seats and lighting with an Asian flavour.

In the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt or in Fremantle, Perth, men will sit gossiping in the coffee and gelato bars while women come and go (probably not talking of Michaelangelo). Leichhardt Council has recently held a competition to design a piazza in Norton Street, while in Carlton, Melbourne, a shopping mall was built with a campanile. This raises the spectre of 'ethnic theme parks' as the only recognised way of dealing with diversity of cultures.

Religious buildings and ethno-specific clubs and reception centres often provide the core of communal life for the diverse ethnic groups of Australia. Even when the residents move out of the area they will often return to these places to speak their own language and to meet on ground which they feel is legitimately recognised as their territory. It is probably in reaction to this territorial claim that Anglo-Australians put up such strong resistance to the building of Islamic mosques and Hindu or Buddhist temples in areas such as Campbelltown and Lakemba in Sydney. There is not the same sense of anxiety associated with Christian sects like the Greek Orthodox. Nor, indeed, is there any recognition of the perhaps much greater economic and cultural significance of the building of the now ubiquitous American cultural shrines, the McDonald's hamburger and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets.

Migrants who have been used to dense urban living in their country of origin have developed a great tradition of using public, open space for all kinds of social and cultural activities. Australian parks, public gardens, bush picnic areas and beaches have become the much-loved sites for vast multigenerational extended family gatherings where games are played, feasts are eaten, walks are taken and raised voices lay aural claim to territory far exceeding the physical space occupied. The more demure public persona of the Anglo-Australian is often affronted by the extent of space occupied and the flamboyance of this behaviour.

This is some of the public evidence of the NESB migrant presence within Australia. But these things have happened ad hoc, mostly by accident or appropriation rather than by design. They refer to a set of historical inheritances and reminiscences about the use of public and private space which were generated from a different geographic location and were the cultural expression of a particular combination of political, economic, social and environmental conditions.



Understanding the migrant spatial experience

The migration trauma of leaving everything familiar whether for social, economic or political reasons, places the new arrival to this country in an extremely disoriented, vulnerable position. There are often great expectations of a land of abundant wealth, egalitarianism and peace without class or political discrimination. There is not only a new language and conceptual framework to grasp, but also the loss of reference points, cultural context, known ways of doing things and the right places in which to do them. There is the loss of kinship and friendship structures which provide the social context and significant nodes in the spatial cognitive map. There is also the loss of loved places which have been the sites of significant life experiences.

Many NESB migrants will initially form ghetto communities usually in areas with an already strongly determined architectural and spatial character. Their impact on the physical environment is relatively superficial.

For the new arrival, a locality which offers the nearest thing to home in terms of language and customs, goods and services, and proximity to people of like culture is a valuable transition stage for learning about the new country from a position of relative protection. These neighbourhoods, when they develop to a certain point of acceptance, are visited by older Australian residents because of their 'exoticism' and the insights they can provide into how other people live. Even if there is a process of replacement of one ethnic group by another, the richness of this patina of overlays adds cultural variety and value to the city.

Because of the power inherent in ownership of property, most people in Australia aspire to home ownership. This provides the opportunity for migrants to exercise their territorial rights to privacy, autonomy, security and cultural expression. Often, after a period of hard work and personal sacrifice, migrants are ready to realise this 'Australian dream'. It may, at first, be a unit or flat or a relatively humble cottage in one of the poorer inner-city suburbs. Home improvements are often undertaken which can transform a decrepit late nineteenth-century dwelling into a more robust structure with new features replacing those which are either decayed or which seem dysfunctional.

The next step up the economic ladder is to build a home of one's own, usually in one of the new outer suburbs where land is available and relatively cheap. It is an opportunity to demonstrate success. This is where the physical form of the dwelling and land could be shaped to realise more fully the desired lifestyle of the new resident.

However, all sorts of constraints come to bear. Not only do council regulations have to be met, but also the context for this new life is one where all the richness of resources and infrastructure of the inner city are absent: proximity to compatriots, local shops, community services, public transport. Variety of choice and a sense of community have gone.

Frequently, migrants return 'home' for a visit at some stage to find that the people and the place have changed. They often get a sense of being permanent expatriates, never quite integrated in Australia but no longer familiar and at ease in their country of origin from which they have been experientially separated.

By the next generation, things have usually changed dramatically. There remains a familiarity with some aspects of the cultural heritage of the previous generation but a stronger identification with mainstream Australian cultural practices. This generation will have shaped their public experience within the Australian spatial context and will probably aspire to live away from the ghetto and to become 'integrated'. The opportunity for cultural dialogue diminishes.

Multicultural heritage

Conventional attitudes to Australian cultural heritage have been largely concerned with the reconstitution and well-being of nineteenth-century buildings which are bitterly contested by developers and conservationists. People's desire for a sense of connection to the past is often associated with the familiarity of major public buildings and places: town halls, courthouses, palaces of industry and commerce, museums, cathedrals and churches, and grand old homesteads. But nothing could be more ludicrous than the vestiges of nineteenth-century building facades being glued to the fronts of multistorey office blocks and hotels with all trace lost of their original function, style in relation to their peers, and scale within the general architectural and urban landscape. In losing their purpose and social and cultural context, they also lose their meaning and effectiveness as metaphorical triggers.

However, this nostalgia for things past needs further examination. The organisation Common Ground in Britain has, as one of its basic tenets, the need to remember:

. . . the richness of the commonplace and the value of the everyday, to savour the symbolism with which we have endowed nature, to revalue our emotional engagement with places and all that they mean to us and to be actively involved in their care.

There are undoubtedly great differences in attitude towards col-

lective heritage and common culture between the old world and the new. In Australia, our sense of antiquity is associated with an ancient natural landscape and with the cultures of Aboriginal people. During the last 200 years, the waves of immigrants, of a great variety of ethnic and racial origins, have caused an abrupt disjuncture with the previously gentle evolutionary process. Public nostalgia for a genteel Anglo cultural past has provided an illusion of homogeneity and continuity.

The material evidence of ethnic minority settlement is rarely celebrated. It would be interesting to survey the public landmarks in Australia to analyse how many of them referred to the contributions of any ethnic minority group or individual to civic or national interest. There is the obvious bias in favour of British influence, and myopia in relation to any other national group. It is probably based on the belief that it would only be of interest to the particular group being represented and not to the community at large; or it may have been a more deliberate decision to obliterate the histories of these other cultural groups.

However, community consciousness is changing. There is an increasing interest in social history (stimulated especially by the Bicentenary) and urban history. The Living Museum of the West in Melbourne and the Museum of Migration in Adelaide are excellent examples of community participation in the construction of history setting a totally different agenda. There is a much greater concern with folk life: traditional customs, arts and crafts, cultural practices, skills and industries. This would seem to point the way for a new set of histories to be celebrated in the public domain by a variety of ethnic landmarks (for example, landing places and gathering centres; places of religious worship and gathering; property and land ownership; ethnic conflict; individuals of high professional standing or achievement; journeys and discoveries; industries established and other social and cultural places of importance to NESB people).

The Australian Heritage Commission has recently recognised 'social value' as a criterion for preservation and has commissioned research into the impact of NESB communities on the built fabric of Australia since World War II. A recent brave attempt by the South Australian Heritage Commission to list a Greek delicatessen and grocery shop which used to be a significant local centre of community life was met with some criticism from the community. Clearly, this ran counter to the way they wished to be commemorated. It is obviously very important for community values to be respected and represented and these will differ between cultures. This indicates the need to negotiate over values not only relating to ethnicity, but also to class and gender, not to mention political affiliation, which underpin people's sense of place:

To preserve effectively, we must know for what the past is being retained, and for whom.

Future directions

The creative potential and vitality of the cultural practices of NESB migrants are a rich resource. This resource can underpin the growth of new Australian forms of cultural expression, which challenge existing values, question entrenched attitudes, give spice to intellectual dialogue and work towards shared visions of a national future which acknowledges and values diversity. If this attitude of mind is applied to the design of the urban environment there are many instances where drawing on other cultural practices would seem to offer a more desirable relationship between people and between people and places.

One of the keys to the success of the process of multicultural planning and urban design is the sharing of power: the power to envision, the power to express, the power to decide and the power to act. If multicultural planning and urban design in Australia is to achieve validity it will be through a genuinely participatory process with equality of status between cultural groups, and between communities and the professional designers who offer their skills to facilitate bridging between the vision and the reality.

For NESB migrants to have the confidence to contribute effectively, they need to start from a position of strength. Their understandable desire, when arriving in the new country, may be to live among their own people. There is an anxiety among designers about reinforcing this separateness by making environments which stylistically and physically simulate the forms of the country of origin. It is felt that these migrants live transitorily in their arrival places and that their tenancy, in due course as they assimilate into the general community, will be replaced by other ethnic groups with different needs and forms of expression. It is thought that it is better to provide from the start the kind of environment that they will have to get used to anyway when they move on.

But this is to deny the existence of these communities and their cultures and their right to leave their mark, in the interests of, at best, a bland homogeneity and, at worst, a forced acceptance of the dominant culture. What we stand to gain is the development of locally distinctive places which offer choice in ways of living and may provide models which can be emulated elsewhere.

The visual squalor of our suburbs has been described by Robin Boyd, the famous Australian architect and critic, as 'the Australian ugliness' rather than the Australian dream. The suburbs are unsym-

pathetic to the climate, insensitive to the landscape, ignorant of the potential of local materials and provide little opportunity for the creative expression of the users.

Most new residential design is based on the same old model of domestic life, despite the obvious loneliness and isolation suffered by many of the inhabitants, particularly in the new urban growth centres which are so badly served in every way: environmentally, culturally and socially. The nuclear and single-parent family and now, increasingly smaller units, seem a socially and economically impoverished form of existence compared with extended family life, shared households or housing co-operatives. Variety in housing provision would allow for richness of choice and a more diverse demographic mix.

With minimal public transport, few social amenities, lack of access to sporting, health, education, shopping, neighbourhood or employment resources, streets which are hostile to bicycle or pedestrian use and almost no recreational public space, it is hardly surprising that cultural expression is stifled. People are incarcerated in hermetically sealed technology pods, their socio-cultural expression quenched by their immersion in hyperspace—the ubiquitousness of television and communications technology.

The recent pressure from both federal and other levels of government for increased urban density (though primarily generated from economic concerns) seems to offer an opportunity to reconsider the possibilities for social interaction and cultural creativity.

A vision for the future might be one where public areas are designed not just for cars but as places where neighbours can meet socially; children can play safely; gardens can be shared either for growing food or for regenerating urban bushland. There would be places where a diverse but sympathetic group of people could live, who could help one another to do chores, deal with challenges and, through their awareness, provide a degree of security and protection. There could be a mix of social and cultural facilities integrated into the local environment, where people regard the neighbourhood not just as a geographic accident, but as a site for enriching social and cultural experience.

In traditional village and suburban life in many countries in Europe and Asia, forms of mutual support still survive. The growth of economically polarised cities, where people are separated from one another and these informal exchanges are undermined is diminishing the quality of many aspects of life for all but the wealthy.

It is difficult for Australians who have been brought up to expect the right to a piece of land and their own autonomous transport system to relinquish these in favour of greater communality. But environmental, economic and social imperatives demand a change. An alliance between communities, environmentalists, open-minded

design professionals and visionary artists, craftspeople and artisans prepared to work collaboratively, could see the development of radically new ways of designing the urban environment.

There are currently a number of projects being undertaken around Australia by community artists, architects and urban designers, environmentalists and community groups who are working collaboratively with one another and with local councils to achieve living, working and public environments which draw on the cultures of the diverse communities of Australia.

At Springvale in Melbourne, the ethnically and racially diverse communities had a continuing consultative and creative relationship with a collaborative team working within the council: landscape architect; environmental officer and community arts officer. The whole neighbourhood is being reshaped to enrich and express the cultural lives of its residents through a range of arts and design projects.

Marrickville in Sydney is an ethnically complex inner-city neighbourhood having been settled by wave after wave of different migrant groups. Recently, an exhibition of artworks about the significance of place by the Portuguese, Lebanese, (previously) Yugoslav and Aboriginal residents reverberated with a great number of local councils. It was a mechanism employed by Community Arts Marrickville to assist people to overcome language barriers to communicate the depth of their feelings and experience. The area has become the target of intense academic interest and is beginning to generate research which will be an invaluable guide for governments and other policy bodies in relation to multiculturalism, urban design and heritage.

An award-winning community cultural centre in Box Hill in Melbourne was designed in an unorthodox way. Through the efforts of a dedicated collaborative team comprising architects, landscape architects, artist, local council community arts officer and engineer, the ethnically diverse communities of the area were involved over several months in both the design and some aspects of the making of elements of this enormously popular and successful facility. Recently, I went to visit it and fell into step with an elderly woman making her way purposefully towards the building. When I asked what she thought of it she answered: 'Well dear, it might look a bit strange to you but we love it'.

Cultural diversity as a basis for urban design

Settlers in Australia have been encouraged to see this land as available for unbridled consumption, rich in natural resources,

sparsely settled, politically stable, peaceful and relatively socially egalitarian. The big banana, like the magic pudding, is self-renewing and always available to be devoured over and over again. But the big banana is nearly bankrupt and it is time to take stock and rethink.

In the postmodern city of strangers, what is it that gives our lives social and cultural meaning? Is there something beyond the lotus-eating stupor of hyperspace, the cities of the imagination? When geographic communities dissolve, the conduits are maintained through shared needs, values and interests, through family relationships and friendship, through components of identity: gender; sexual preference; age; class; ethnicity and race; political or ideological affiliations; religious or other value systems; and through similarities in life circumstances and through association with special places. It is important for these things to be expressed in a real and tangible way within the urban environment.

The challenge in Australia for cultural planning and urban design is that we have no homogeneity of culture. Our public life must be developed on the basis of cultural pluralism. Public space must deal with and express differences (of economy, race and ethnicity, class and gender) and yet, at the same time, be the symbolic expression of, and contribute towards, a sense of national identity.

We are faced with the problem of lack of agreement about cultural values, and the concomitant lack of appropriate symbols to express these values in the public environment. The choice about how to deal with this has fallen to the individual planner, architect or landscape designer who offers idiosyncratic forms, new combinations and new spatial arrangements in response to each design problem. And so we continue the cultural fragmentation process and lose a sense of common meaning and shared values. It is this process that makes long-established Australians fearful of, and antagonistic towards, the expression of the NESB migrant presence in the public domain.

The process of rapid change is stressful and demanding. Yet, one could take a different attitude and see this as opening up new opportunities, challenging entrenched opinions and stimulating creativity. A Chinese-Australian friend described her feelings to me thus: 'I feel like a banana—yellow on the outside and white on the inside'; a statement full of ambiguities.

What happens when big banana meets little Italy? This is the contradiction inherent in urban design: the celebration of cultural diversity within the desire for a strong national identity. I prefer to take a Yin and Yang view on the matter and accept the simultaneous validity of both.

So the challenge is to stimulate a sense of common purpose and pride while still expressing cultural difference. Can we accept fragmentation and indeterminacy as part of a process of experimentation towards setting new collective goals, realising visions which arise out of a dialectical process: a dialogue between cultures, and between people and place?

Recommendations

- 1 Change legislation at all levels of government to ensure that the development of public and private places is based on the understanding and celebration of cultural diversity.
- 2 Encourage all levels of government to consult with communities in the design of environments which are not only appropriate to their needs but are also culturally enriching.
- 3 Encourage all levels of government to adopt integrated planning processes which take a holistic approach to social, cultural, environmental, economic and physical considerations in urban development.
- 4 Encourage tertiary education institutions to undertake research projects about multicultural planning and design, and to teach multicultural approaches to aesthetics, spatial design and heritage.
- 5 Use the opportunity provided by new federal government policies (for example, Social Justice, Patterns of Urban Settlement, Access and Equity, National Housing Strategy, Building Better Cities, Regional Development and Cultural Tourism) to promote cultural diversity as the basis of planning and urban design.
- 6 Persuade design professionals to collaborate with communities and people with other skills (environmentalists, artists, craftspeople and artisans) to design environments which are culturally distinctive and expressive.
- 7 Use diverse cultural criteria to identify, commemorate and celebrate Australia's heritage and history in consultation with the relevant communities. This would include built fabric, places/events/people of significance and intangible heritage (oral history, traditional stories, rituals and folklore).

Additional reading

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