

Living on the outside – cultural diversity and the transformation of public space in Melbourne

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Abstract

- One of the key impacts of cultural diversity on the public culture of Victoria has been on the attitude to and use of public space, in its broadest sense (encompassing political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions, as well as physical). This has transformed Melbourne from a closed, largely monocultural and inward looking city to one which has embraced cultural diversity, openness and “Living on the Outside”, as part of mainstream culture. Today Victorian leaders cite cultural diversity as a key factor in making Melbourne one of the world’s “most liveable cities”, and its value is recognised as an economic/tourist attraction strategy. A graphic illustration of this is the recently announced Cultural Precincts project. The presentation explores these developments and the socio-cultural, economic and political processes that have underpinned them. The presentation is based on interviews and other research undertaken in the context of the Victorian project for the educational website [Making Multicultural Australia: Exploring Victoria’s cultural diversity](#), launched on Monday 27 April 2009.

Context

- Making Multicultural Australia educational website – Victoria project
<http://multiculturalaustralia.edu.au>
 - explores the history and impact of cultural diversity on the public culture of the state
- A key impact emerging from the 50+ interviews:
 - the transformation of attitudes to and use of public space in Melbourne

Public space

- in its geospatial, political, socio-cultural, commercial dimensions
- Transformation of Melbourne –
 - from closed, inward looking, exclusionary, monocultural to
 - open, outward looking, participatory, celebrating cultural diversity - living on the outside

Before

- 1950s
 - Moomba festival (since 1955) – “let’s get together and have fun”
 - 1956 Olympics
 - isolated events
- 1960s and 70s: migrant impressions
 - Ethnic Albanian Eric Lloga: Melbourne in the 1960s – “a dead place”
 - Italian-born Laura Mecca talks of going to Flinders St Station at 4pm rush hour to be among people

Today - living on the outside

- Piazzas, outdoor cafes & restaurants are commonplace
- Multiplicity of street festivals and celebrations –
 - Lygon St Festa (1978), Antipodes Festival (1987), Sydney Road Brunswick Street Party (1989), Chinatown New Year Parade (1980)
- Museums – Immigration, Jewish, Chinese, Italian Historical Society
- Federation Square – modelled on European piazza
- State government investment in “ethnic” social spaces through the cultural precincts project

State government investment in “ethnic” social spaces through the cultural precincts project



Precincts project

- **\$8 million joint city and State government project**
 - Greek - Lonsdale St; Chinese - Little Bourke St; Italian - Lygon St
 - Comments on Greek project launched March 2009:
 - “The funding was essential to ensuring the precinct remains sustainable and attractive for investment and cultural and tourism activities” - *Premier John Brumby*
 - “The funding showed a commitment to enhancing Melbourne’s diverse public spaces” *Lord Mayor Robert Doyle*
- **Coming together of cultural, political, economic space in the heart of Melbourne.**
- **“Mainstreaming” of cultural difference reflects access of minorities to the elite power roles**
- **Key “brokerage” role of renewed Victorian Multicultural Commission**

How did this come about?

- Influence of migrants on lifestyle – claimed by many – eg
 - Arnold Zable re Jewish influence
 - Laura Mecca re impact of Italians
- Political factors
 - “Left” political groups and popular culture –
 - eg FILEF, Demokritos
 - Christian activism and pan-ethnic alliances – eg Ecumenical Migration Centre; migrant workers movement (with trade unions)
 - Chinese collaboration with Lib state and city governments
 - Move of Left migrants into ALP and incorporation of agenda into 1980s Cain Govt
 - Responsiveness of liberal Liberals to ethnic influences (Fraser, Kennett, Georgiou)

How did this come about?

- Recognition of value and mainstreaming of cultural diversity as economic/tourist attraction strategy
 - **City Councillor David Wang's Chinatown project 1970s – part of reviving the central business district**
 - Aim to transform declining Chinese quarter of Little Bourke Street with archways, lighting etc
 - Critics argued it would make Melbourne's Chinese community a curiosity; Wang said it would promote Chinese culture, attract shoppers and tourists.
 - Project realised under Hamer Govt - Chinatown launched 1976
 - Wang also founder of Keep Melbourne Beautiful
 - **Festivals**
 - From Festival of All Nations (1973) to Spoleto Arts Festival (1986) to mainstream Melbourne International Arts Festival
 - **Interaction of heritage education and multiculturalism, with cultural tourism and community story-telling**
 - 1974 Greek Cultural League; 1982 Jewish Museum; 1985 Chinese Museum; 1988 Italian Historical Society; 1998 Immigration Museum – a Kennett initiative
 - Today, the museums are developing joint marketing plans

What insights does this narrative provide?

- Interface between culture, politics and opportunity structure (Rath/Collins)
- Interaction between different communities, through every day multiculturalism and political structures produces wider socio-cultural transformations
- A key expression of these transformations is in public space its design and use

- Four parallel processes at work
 - Political emergence of Left and working class immigrants stressing ethnic issues and using space communally
 - Strengthening commercial presence seeing locality spaces as economically valuable and linking to government
 - Everyday multiculturalism that simply changes the way space is used
 - Heritage institutions that become stakeholders in pluralist uses and definitions of public space