Book reviews

20th Century Building Materials

Editor: Thomas Jester for the US National Parks Service.


The content of this book is valuable to preservation architects, building technologists, owners, maintenance staff and historians. It is a distillation of the case studies and historical research presented by speakers at the ‘Preserving the Recent Past’ conference held in Chicago in April 1995.

What makes this book invaluable is its broad coverage of the materials that came into prominence in the USA between 1880 and 1960. Most were also manufactured in Australia – although not necessarily under the same brand name and usually a decade or so later. The preservation of these materials is a recent phenomenon and promises to offer complex problems. Many of these materials have already passed out of existence and their manufacturing processes and equipment are now either obsolete or non-existent. Some of these materials and their manufacturing processes have been or are still hazardous to our health.

Materials discussed are grouped under seven categories: metals, concrete, wood and plastics, masonry, glass, flooring, and a general category roofing, siding and walling. For each of the 36 materials presented, brand names and dates of production, historical development and conservation or reproduction methods are discussed. Included are aluminium, monel metal, structural glass, spandrel glass, acoustic ceiling tiles, reinforced and cast cements, terrazzo and asphalt shingles and simulated sidings.

There is enough information here to repair a curtain wall building or a humble cottage covered in the fake brick that insidiously crept through Australian suburbs during the 1970s, transforming the cheap and simple working cottage into a cheaper structure with the air of dereliction about it. However, there may be a time when we actually want to preserve this simulated material along with the early curtain wall office buildings. This book contains the information needed to sort out such problems.

This book also serves as a model for the technologist researching Australian-made building materials. Materials such as asbestos cement sheeting, cinder block, reed reinforced walling block, pressed metal and a range of others need to be explained in a similar comprehensive and ready reference to close up our knowledge gaps.

20th Century Building Materials is well illustrated using contemporary photographs, diagrams and early advertising material.

The book is a necessity in architecture libraries and for practitioners dealing with building repair.
Visions of a Village: Canterbury Shops and Shopping 1880s-1990s

Author: Don Gibb and Stuart Warmington

Publisher: Canterbury History Group, Melbourne 1995

This ground-breaking study of a small urban shopping centre in Melbourne's eastern suburbs has much to offer the architect, urban historian and the general reader. Based on painstaking research in directories and rate registers, Visions of a Village is the story of small-scale urban renewal and of the changes in retailing over a century. Don Gibb's text places the Maling Road shopping centre and adjacent strip shops in Canterbury Road, Canterbury, Victoria, in the context of 20th century retailing, while Stuart Warmington's delightful line drawings illustrate the charming streetscapes of the area.

During the last decade Maling Road has been reinventing itself, using a balance of nostalgia and shrewd marketing which attracts hundreds of people from all over Melbourne on weekends and holidays. The village atmosphere of Maling Road provides a very different experience from the department store or shopping mall. The idea of the street cafe, borrowed from the European models, has been amalgamated with the British teashop to provide the focus for a visit to Maling Road, where those who come to browse in the bookshop or the antique market, pick up some King Island brie or an exquisite lace tablecloth, complete their afternoon’s entertainment with coffee and cake at one of the many cafes along the street. Shopping for entertainment rather than necessity is the reason for its wider popularity, although the variety of small food specialist shops in a limited area— with delicatessens, bakery, patisserie, fishmonger and butcher—caters to regular, busy and affluent middle-class customers.

As a local history, this book demonstrates the richness and diversity of local village life, but more importantly it shows the changes in society mirrored in the changes in a tiny pocket of the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The Canterbury shopping centre grew up, like countless others, around the local railway station, providing a service to local residents. Between 1905 and 1925, the number of houses in Canterbury increased fivefold. The photograph of the grocer’s shop with its white-coated staff on page 18 reminds us of the predecessors of the modern supermarket. Food shopping, for example, was a local service. At the end of the First World War, there was a grocer or general store for every 80 families in Melbourne. The typical grocer’s shop required a number of sales assistants to slice the bacon for each customer, weigh the sugar and biscuits and advise on the keeping qualities of cheese. Self-service stores did not become common in Australia until the 1950s.

Beverley Kingston, in her survey of the history of shopping Australia, Basket, Bag and Trolley, published in 1994, concentrates to a large extent on Sydney retailing, commenting that “a satisfying parallel story redolent of local names

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and memories could ... be told, if only for the sheer pleasure the memories would bring.'

Don Gibbs has taken up this challenge and has indeed provided the local residents of Canterbury with a great deal of pleasure in recalling the history of the Maling Road and Canterbury Road shops. For those who come from farther afield, his book is a fascinating reminder of how shopping was conducted in a typical local village for over 100 years as well as a reassurance that the successful recycling of older buildings is alive and well in Canterbury.
Hunters and Collectors. The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia

Author: Tom Griffiths


Once, forty years ago, I had the occasion to do some research in the bowels of the National Museum of Victoria. I had a rickety desk under a naked light globe with a metal globule chain. The desk was at the end of a dark alleyway of glass cases. They were filled with a menagerie of stuffed animals, but I remember especially the primates – noses pressed against the glass. It was an eerie enough feeling to walk by them, but to sit in the island of light and feel their silent surveillance encouraged all sorts of nightmarish distractions. Some of these stuffed specimens were the prize exhibits of Professor Frederick McCoy, a firm believer that Charles Darwin had it all wrong. Taxidermy was the ‘virtual reality’ of another era. McCoy felt triumphant that his exhibits would allow any visitor to the museum to ‘see how infinitely remote the creature (in this case a gorilla) is from humanity, and how monstrously the writers have exaggerated the points of resemblance’.

Tom Griffiths has a wonderful photograph in Hunters and Collectors of some of McCoy’s collection being transported from the University of Melbourne to the museum on the back of a dray. ‘The street theatre of taxidermy’ is its caption. There is much theatre in the ways in which the past has been collected, possessed and preserved through Victoria’s history.

It will be of no surprise to anyone who reads Hunters and Collectors that the judges of the National Book Council short listed it for the ‘Banjo’ Award for Non-Fiction, 1996. Hunters and Collectors, like Griffiths’ other books, Secrets of the Forest and Beechworth, is history at its best – humane, gently serious, enlightening and full of stories. The dramatic personae of his theatre are many – amateur ethnologists, archaeologists, naturalists, eccentric scavengers, grave robbers, nature writers and antiquarians possessed of all sorts of collecting fevers. Griffiths has a fine talent for pen portraits both of individuals and ideas. They must number hundreds, from the wild ones like Reynell Everleigh Johns and Isaac Selby to the more sedately intellectual, like John Mulvaney and Edmund Gill. The gambit of what was collected is just as wide.

In the winding road young scholars have to take to achieve their goals these days, Griffiths was a hunter and collector himself for a time. He was field officer for the State Library of Victoria, engaged in the acquisition of historical manuscripts and pictures for the library’s research collections. It was known as the ‘cup-of-tea job’, he writes at one point, because it was full of lounge-room negotiations by which precious personal memorabilia became part of more public memory. There are all sorts of dilemmas – political, social, and cultural
— in transforming things into heritage. Griffiths’ social ease across generations, class, gender and ethnic differences assuaged the pain of giving and enlarged the institutional sense of obligation in acquiring. He takes that same ease into his writing on topics that usually fall outside the domain of academic historians, and on issues that, if they seem to have trivial dress, are of paramount importance for our cultural well-being. The care for the past, we all know, is really the care for the future.

‘Who owns the past?’ ‘Who owns the land?’ These are the two great questions of this thoughtful book. The unequivocal answer given to us is: ‘the future’. Any culture, of course, has to ask these two questions, but ours has to ask them more pertinently and more immediately. Griffiths cites Judith Wright at the beginning of his book: ‘These two strands – the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion – have become part of me. It is a haunted country’. Our country is haunted by its past and the present that the past has made. I don’t know what exorcism will rid us of these ghosts and spirits, but I think the sort of history that Tom Griffiths writes is a kind of exorcism.

That is because Tom Griffiths is a historian full of respect — respect for the rights of actors in the past to be seen in the context of their times; respect for the sort of knowledge and discourse that enlarges the particularities of every person and event; respect for the different perceptions victimhood gives on even the most mundane of cultural actions; and respect for the uncertainty that it is in every judgement.

Respect in itself does not make an outstanding historian. For that imagination is needed — so too is creative experiment in narrative forms, an eye for images that do not merely ‘illustrate’ but tell a story of their own, a fierce resolve to be totally exhaustive — not just of the sources but of all the interpretations of the sources, artful style in the sense that the historian is composing literature, and courage to take readers where they have never been and in ways that they have never thought of.

_Hunters and Collectors_ has all these virtues. And even better — it is full of promise of more to come.