World Heritage, Urban Design and Tourism  
– Three Cities in the Middle East

Author: Luna Khirfan  
Publisher: Ashgate Publishing, 2014  
Review by Stuart Read

Given the civil wars engulfing Syria and Iraq, ongoing conflicts in Northern Lebanon, tens of thousands of refugees fleeing embattled cities and areas and Israel’s continued expansion of settlements on Palestinian land, this book and its theme are a welcome jolt of local factual information. That its author attempts to straddle three usually siloed academic (and practice) fields: tourism, World Heritage and urban design research studies—is both welcome and overdue. All three realms have much ground in common and to gain by cooperative working and some more humility.

What does war and mass-migration (temporary or not) mean for some Middle Eastern cities, which include some of the world’s longest-settled urban areas? How is the historic urban landscape approach, increasingly coming into fashion in UNESCO and cultural heritage circles, relevant or applicable in such testing, shifting times and places? Or indeed a priority?

Reports on the Middle East are so inflected with international, regional and national political agendas, it is hard to know what to think, or believe. Was it ever thus? This meeting place of east and west, vital link in extensive trading and pilgrimage networks since ancient times has long been fought for. Its cities have risen from deserts and alongside its few rivers and been ground into the dust by invaders, conquered and retaken in ongoing efforts to control territories and profits from trade, access to holy sites and profitable pilgrimage businesses.

They have been continually rebadged by one army, religious group or another, from the start. I have enjoyed reading biographies of cities such as Baghdad and Cairo, another on Bazaars, markets and merchants of the Islamic World and a book on destruction of the world’s great libraries (by the National Librarian of Venezuela). All point up this rich layering, tragedy and triumph, in those cities, not to mention Alexandria, Damascus, Aleppo or others. This only reflects the region’s attractions: geographical, climatic, cultural and more.

Luna Khirfan is an academic from the University of Waterloo, Canada and writes about historic urban landscapes, place-making, place-experience and various ‘viewers’ or ‘users’, particularly focussing on tourism. This book is based on her PhD research on such themes.

She chooses three case study projects in Aleppo in Syria (before the current bombings from 2012 onwards), Acre in Israel and Al-Salt in Jordan to contrast three types of place-making
strategies. Her approach is inter-disciplinary, examining key relationships between heritage conservation, city urban space design (for instance, gathering and circulation routes, public and private spaces) and tourism development in each.

Some are (or in Aleppo’s case, were) thriving or functioning urban sites with established local and some international tourism, with potential to grow. Others such as Al-Salt are sadly well off the circuit and present challenges to establish a tourism base that ‘fits’ local culture comfortably. While this might present employment and social benefits for locals yet it inevitably brings change and frictions. Even providing basic community services such as functioning sewerage, water and walkable footpaths for the elderly to get about is a fundamental challenge. Where outside projects with funds and agendas bypass such basic human needs in the rush to meet their own project targets and deliverables, will they succeed? Or last?

Her choices of case studies and analyses are instructive, pointing up well-intentioned foreign international aid funds, a mixture of attitudes amongst providers, intermediaries and community groups. These projects generally use outside (foreign or remote urban) heritage and other experts to make urban interventions in historic cities or rural districts. Some succeed far better than others, which is the chief focus of her book. Which and why?

It is intriguing how good and how poor the ‘fit’ can be—whether a project team, or government agency’s approach is ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’, whether any or meaningful community consultation precedes and continues to inform projects as they unfold. Bureaucratic systems such as existed (tense is past) in Aleppo bypassed community consultation or made it a mere puppet show of window-dressing, meaning a lack of coordination of one set of services going into historic precincts, major disruption to services and daily life. This led to active opposition to the project and withdrawal of goodwill.

And equally, how selective and quixotic the ‘product’ and ‘stories’ each place is deemed to be telling or selling to the tourism market. Crusader heritage dominates Acre’s offer, yet Muslim and Palestinian, non-Crusader histories inform it and continue, offering a far richer story for tourists and operators, were any interested or made aware of them.

Divided into three parts, the first examines the context of the three academic realms and the reality of each case study’s city structure, functioning, population, culture and issues. The second discusses place-making, how significance at various levels is determined, strategies to make urban improvements (e.g. circulation or shopping) and public participation. Khirfan makes much of local distinctiveness, of place, peoples, and cultures. The third outlines place-experience and offers conclusions.

In a nutshell these are that local culture and communities are critical, deserve respect, time and effort to consult (early on, and ongoing), gain support from and include in any desired change. Commodifying and ‘selling’ this packaged culture to tourists can be counter-productive, pushing those wanting a ‘real’ or cultural experience away to find their own way. And putting off the locals, who tourism is touted to bring benefits (and new facilities) to. Some professional modesty and inclusiveness would be a good start. Hiring Arabic-(or other language) speakers and placing them on the ground to consult and include locals in decisions and actions is a good second step. Being prepared to change fixed plans when realities point up faults or omissions is also recommended in terms of sustainable actions or outcomes.

Would that every World Bank, IMF or funding-related expert-in-the-making be given this book and a training course based on its case-study focus! Commended.

Stuart Read
The Other Moderns, Sydney’s Forgotten European Design Legacy
Edited by: Rebecca Hawcroft
Publisher: New South Publishing, Sydney, 2017
ISBN 9781742235561, pp320
Review by Dr Noni Boyd, Architectural Historian

Rebecca Hawcroft has done a magnificent job in tracking down an incredibly wide range of work by European-trained designers in Sydney from the late 1930s onwards; a task made all the more difficult as many of the arrivals anglicised their surnames. The breadth of Sydney’s mid-century modern designs has yet to be fully identified, and this study acknowledges that the series of essays forms the tip of an iceberg.

The Other Moderns traces the legacy of designers trained in Berlin, Budapest, Prague, Vienna and Zurich, who fled the worsening political situation in Europe or managed to survive the war years and eventually settled in Sydney. In her introduction Hawcroft quotes August Sarnitz’s analysis of Viennese Architecture:

When one attempts nowadays to offer an interpretation of the effect immigration from Vienna had on culture, it can be said that in the field of architecture that practically the entire artistic avant-garde was compelled to leave the country involuntarily (Sarnitz in Hawcroft 2017: 14)

This study is not just relevant to Sydney, but is important in the growing body of research on the émigré architects and designers working not only in Australasia but will assist with comparisons with design work in countries throughout the world to which the ‘artistic avant-garde’ fled.

In researching their acquisition of an elegant drinks trolley, designed by ZsuZsa Kozma in 1938-39 for the Simor’s Budapest apartment, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was able to locate its designer in Sydney, where she had been living and working since 1947. Prior to the Other Moderns exhibition few knew of this talented designer, and yet Susan Kozma-Orlay was one of five furniture designers who submitted designs for University House at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. Throughout this book are examples of furniture designs that continue to be admired by collectors, but little was known of the designers. Passionate collectors and the families who commissioned the furniture have both contributed to this series of essays.

The post war shortages of building materials and house size restrictions in Sydney suited the European designers who were used to planning compact apartments and designing the necessary furniture. In Sydney apartment living became more common after the disruptions of both the first and second world wars. Many of the larger scale apartment blocks erected in Sydney from the late-1950s onwards were designed by architects who had trained in Europe where apartment living was common, ‘adding layers of different built culture to complement the multi-cultural society that Australia became’ (see Wheeler’s chapter - ‘The Migrants who built Modern Sydney’, p263). Photographs of apartment interiors have been tracked down and the exhibition featured settings where the whole design composition could be appreciated.

The design legacy outlined in this book was not so much forgotten as ignored, as past architectural commentators chose not to fully explore the wide range of work of the European-trained designers throughout Australia. What emerges from these essays is that considerable research has been done over the past 15 years in identifying the designers of buildings, interiors and individual pieces of furniture, and yet this work remains under represented in Australian public collections and heritage schedules. Publications such as this will greatly assist in providing the necessary background to argue for the protection of total compositions such the Hillman House in Roseville, designed by Dr Henry Epstein in 1949, and will also help to raise the profile of Sydney’s rapidly vanishing mid-century modern buildings and interiors.

Dr Noni Boyd
Advertising and Public Memory.  
Social, cultural and historical perspectives on Ghost Signs

Author: Luna Khirfan  
Edited by: Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White  
Publisher: Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies, 2017  
ISBN 978113894689, 324pp  
Review by Peter Romey, Director, Romey.Knaggs Heritage Pty Ltd

This publication is described by its editors as ‘the first scholarly collection on the worldwide interest in the faded remains of advertising signage (popularly known as ‘ghost signs’). Whether these claims are authoritative or not (especially the use of the term worldwide interest, given the relatively narrow geographic range of the contributions), the collection of papers is a very welcome addition to the discussion about what has to date been a fairly esoteric area of interest for the conservation community.

There is some irony in the circumstances whereby many ‘ghost signs’ are only discovered as a by-product of demolition and redevelopment, a process that more often than not threatens our built heritage. Nevertheless, the outcome of the process following the recognition, assessment and recording of these signs as important historic relics is often their removal, along with the building on which they have been applied. So, in such cases the signs constitute important, if temporary, tangible heritage assets.

Published by Routledge, a British based publisher, Advertising and Public Memory has a strong focus on Australian case studies and analysis. The volume comprises a total of 22 chapter, 20 of which are arranged under three broad categories, being: (i) Social Perspectives, (ii) Cultural Perspectives and (iii) Historical Perspectives, although (as would be expected) the division of papers across the categories can be somewhat arbitrary. There are also two generic chapters at the front of the volume that respectively summarise the breadth of literature delving into the subject (by White, Schutt & Roberts) and an evaluation of how best to define what is a ghost sign (by Roberts & Marshall). The latter is particularly interesting in its discussion of what are the appropriate criteria for defining a ghost sign, demonstrating that even at this starting point there is no universally recognised definition.

The majority of the other 20 chapter deal with actual case studies, with minimal academic or theoretical discourse. This emphasis does enhance the relevance of the content for those working across the various conservation disciplines who are required to deal with the issues raised by ghost signs, which are frequently unexpected discoveries at an advanced stage in a redevelopment project when there is overwhelming pressure to avoid delay. As noted above, there is a surprising emphasis on Australian case studies (8), whereas the remainder focus on the UK (5), the US (2), Belgium (2), Peru (1) and Vietnam (1). More than a third (13) of the 32 authors are Australian, and the majority of these are from Victoria University, signifying that ghost signs are a topic of particular interest at that institution.

On this evidence at least, the claim that there is worldwide interest in ghost signs needs further substantiation, and it would have been interesting to have more content from Asia or other places outside the Australia/UK/US sphere. However, that does not to in any way undervalue the contributions of the authors, some of whom (such as Rachel Jackson) have had a long term interest in ghost signs, and it is arguable that the enhanced recognition of the need to manage them appropriately is due to their efforts.

The chapters themselves are quite diverse in scope, notwithstanding the focus on case studies. They range from the potential for an encounter with a ghost sign to trigger feelings of familiarity and cognitive maps (Love), an increased appreciation of ghost signs stimulating enhanced skills in traditional signwriting (Schutt & Mead), the importance of compiling digital collections and mapping the location of ghost signs around a city (Hyde & Barnes) to the importance of developing the appropriate process to conserve a ghost sign (Peeters, De Smedt & Caen). As a counterpoint to the majority of the articles dealing with the serious physical and cultural issues
raised by ghost signs, the volume includes an interesting paper by a signwriter who specialises in producing faux signs that replicate the distressed look of authentic ghost signs (Kasabian). These commissions are in response to what is now a demand for this style of sign, suggesting that the faded look of ghost signs has become fashionable.

The discourse provided by these authors is particularly timely given the number of ghost signs that have been revealed on redevelopment projects in recent times, in Australia at least. A case in point is the very large and graphically impressive Peapes Mensware sign painted in the 1920s or 1930s on the side wall of what is now known as Beneficial House (Wilson, Neave and Berry, 1923), recently revealed when the adjoining 1960s Menzies Hotel building was demolished as part of the Wynyard Place development project.

Whether this frequency actually constitutes an increase of such discoveries, or whether (as seems more likely) these signs are no longer being dismissed and destroyed without further thought, is a moot point. However, these signs are now being given appropriate evaluation, conserved where possible (even if they may again be concealed behind a new building - the case for the Peapes sign), and if not conserved, at least recorded.

Advertising and Public Memory will add value and depth to this process, as much as it is in itself an outcome of our enhanced interest and appreciation of these fading relics of our history.

Peter Romey