Migrant heritage places in Australia

In December 1995, at the close of the International Year of Tolerance, the Australian Heritage Commission launched a guide for migrant groups to use as a way of identifying their heritage places in Australia. The guide was the result of a research project undertaken by the Cultural Landscape Research Unit within the School of Landscape Architecture at the University of New South Wales. The unit is now 10 years old and during those years has focused on heritage interpretations of the landscape with particular emphasis on sense of place.

The migrant heritage project was timely because the process of identifying migrant places is occurring when representations of the Australian identity are changing. Australia has most commonly been represented by images of its wilderness environments. More recently the Australian community has sought to represent Australia as a nation embracing cultural pluralism and tolerance, and the emblems of this change are urban images of harmonious multicultural communities. The advent of this much celebrated culturally pluralist society is a direct result of the massive post World War II immigration program. The shift in Australia’s identity, represented by a change from wilderness icons to images of multicultural communities in cosmopolitan cities, requires a revision in perceptions of Australia’s heritage. To date, heritage perceptions have focused on national parks and World Heritage wilderness sites, as well as sites of British colonial history and more recently, Aboriginal heritage places or sacred sites. While Australian politicians have sought to represent Australia in the international arena as a community with exemplary environmental stewardship, there has been an emerging awareness of another Australian identity, also fully exploited by politicians. This is an urban Australia which shows exemplary tolerance of cultural difference while reaping the rich rewards of 50 years of an immigration program often marked by periods of discrimination. The representation of cultural pluralism, like the environmental wilderness representation, is simultaneously flawed and correct. This article explains the evolution of migrant places in Australian cities in light of changing government policies about migration and changing community values about the ‘Australian way of life’.

The development of migrant heritage places

Migrant heritage places refer to places which reflect the experience of migration and the process of settling into a new country. Such places draw their heritage significance from the social value they have for immigrant communities. For the last three years research has been undertaken in collaboration with different immigrant groups in Australian cities to determine immigrant places which have heritage value for such groups. In the process of this research it has become evident that the nature of places created by immigrants in Australian cities closely reflects the changing policies related to the acceptance of difference by the Anglo-Celtic Australian community.
Although migration has been a continuous phenomenon throughout the 19th century and early-20th century, it was not until the period immediately after the Second World War that the Australian Government decided to embark upon a major migration project to provide the workforce needed for the ambitious industrial schemes proposed. It was anticipated that the migrants would be British and that Australians would experience the benefits of growth and development without significant change to Australian cultural life. The government at the time promised there would be 10 British migrants for every 'foreigner' to allay fears that non-British migration would threaten national identity and social cohesion. The British migrant estimates were not met, however, most choosing to go to the United States. The Australian Government was thus faced with selecting migrants from central Europe and the Mediterranean countries. Australia in the late 1940s was deeply conservative, reflecting British cultural practices, albeit acted out within the 'Australian way of life', and there was little tolerance of difference.

To allay concerns within the Australian community about non-British migrants, a policy of 'assimilation' was established to ensure that migrants were absorbed into the mainstream Australian society with little impact on the Australian way of life. This required some clarity about what was an 'Australian way of life'; something for which Australians had a particular reverence but could not clearly describe.

It is ironic that such a concerted effort to ensure that the Australian culture and British national identity was not changed by the migration program was the very process which resulted in a closely woven fabric of places reflecting cultural diversity. This is now celebrated as the new Australian identity and has resulted in a desire to know more about the history of migration. There is now an acceptance that those places which reveal this history are part of Australia's cultural heritage.

The history of migration from 1945 to 1996 is one driven by three distinct phases in government migration policies. The first phase was known as the period of assimilation and extended from 1947 to 1964. Subsequent phases were known as integrationism (1964-1972) and multiculturalism (1973-present). Particular types of migrant heritage places developed during each of these periods.

**Migrant heritage places associated with assimilationism**

During this period, perhaps the most significant places for migrants were the points of arrival. Unlike the United States, migrants were not subjected to the procedures associated with Ellis Island in New York, but there were distinct experiences associated with arriving in Australia. Between 1947-1965 migrants arrived by ship, so the wharves in major cities were the places redolent with memories of arriving in a strange place, being greeted by little-known relatives or migrant agents and being subjected to the procedures which determined where migrants would go after arrival. The wharves are now derelict and there...
is pressure for their demolition. To date the voices arguing for their retention as heritage have not included the migrants'.

The assimilation period was marked by positive discrimination towards British migrants and their treatment upon arrival was different, as was the accommodation provided. British migrants came as families on an assisted passage and were immediately housed in special hostels built to accommodate families. Non-British migrants were a mixture of refugees and migrants who had paid for their own passage. Refugees were taken to 'reception centres' where they were processed and in many cases dispersed to sites of employment related to the new industries. They were required to work for two years in places nominated by the government. Many of the northern Europeans who were in camps in Germany and did not wish to be repatriated to communist countries such as the former Yugoslavia, were sent to the large hydro-electricity schemes under construction. Other Europeans were sent to major industrial centres, such as remote cities containing steel mines and steel mills and ports. These sites of work can be considered important aspects of migrant history and therefore migrant heritage places. The heritage significance relates to the role migrants played in building the industrial strength of Australia. However, these were also places of great humiliation. For non-British migrants there was no recognition of professional qualifications and most were bonded to work in industry for two years.

The non-British migrants who had paid their own passage were expected to find accommodation in Australian cities which were experiencing severe housing shortages associated with the postwar period. As a result, the sponsoring relatives and immigrant groups developed networks to provide immediate accommodation. In some communities where migrants were predominantly...
single men, such as the Maltese migrants, a system of boarding houses and
clubs grew up in tightly-knit neighbourhoods. In other cases where the migrants
were couples, a system of shared houses arose, often with immigrants being
exploited by landlords — both Australians and other members of immigrant
groups. Sites of the boarding houses and clubs and the inner city precincts
related to particular immigrant groups are part of the urban cultural landscape
reflecting Australia’s non-British immigrant history. Apart from the British
migrant hostels and a few pubs, places which reflect the British migrant
experience have been less easy to discern.

It is interesting that the government rhetoric at the time was that migrants would
live and work among Australians to avoid the formation of ethnic enclaves; yet
policies for housing and employment for non-British migrants were so
discriminatory that they eventually led to immigrant groups clustering together
for basic accommodation and community support.

The non-British migrant places which reflect this period are heavy with
memories associated with discrimination. For the refugees, the escape from
their situation in Europe was enough to overcome the indignities forced upon
them by the Australian society of the 1950s. For the economic migrants,
opportunities to establish consolidated material assets was also a compensation.
But of particular interest for contemporary Australian culture is the way
immigrant groups sustained the cultural practices of their countries of origin,
albeit in hidden places, which provided the seeds later to blossom as Australia’s
multicultural society of the 1990s. It is only in the 1990s that the larger
community is beginning to find out about the ‘hidden Australia’ of the 1940s
and 1950s; particularly as many of the stories about this time are spoken about
in languages other than English, and as the early migrants are now elderly their
stories may die with them. The particular tragedy about assimilationism was
that many children of immigrants were brought up ‘protected’ from the
knowledge of their parents’ culture and the humiliation of discrimination. This
was done so that the children could be ‘new Australians’, unfettered by practices
associated with different cultures. Second and third generation migrants now
seek to know about this lost heritage.

The hidden places where immigrant groups sustained their cultural practices
away from the gaze of the Australians are important aspects of the cultural
landscape. Interestingly, such places were being created at the same time as the
government established Citizen Conventions to consider the needs of the
migrants, while deliberately excluding migrant representation. The Citizen
Convention established the ‘Good Neighbour Movement’, made up of voluntary
Australian groups who were to assist migrants assimilate into the Australian
culture in order to become ‘New Australians’.

In such a climate, cultural practices that were not Australian were hidden in the
back gardens, which became productive farms including vineyards and bakeries; or
in local halls which were inconspicuous places of worship; or in rooms above
shops which became men's clubs for card playing and drinking coffee. Most of the places that reflect the migrant experience in Australian cities at this time are unknown to the mainstream culture. All these places need to be documented as part of the collective heritage of Australia before the sources of knowledge are lost.

The period of integration: 1964 to 1972

By the mid-1960s it was clear that there were problems with the assimilationist policies. The migrant project was certainly building Australia's industrial strength and providing employment — to that extent the project was successful. But the desire to make migrants into Australians who would be absorbed into the fabric of Australian society was not working. Because the migrants had been brought in to work in industry with no provision for housing and minimal provision for English tuition, it was inevitable that immigrant ghettos formed around industrial areas and in inner city areas where housing was cheap. Such ghettos had particularities which were different to the concept of ghettos in Europe and North America. These places have been described as 'zones of transition'. While the ghettos were not associated with crime or racism, there were a number of social problems for the immigrant groups who were becoming increasingly isolated and marginalised by the mainstream society. Migrants, disenchanted with the lack of fulfilment of promises for a better life, were returning to their original countries.

Concern about this at government level prompted new policies about migration which came under the umbrella of 'Integrationism'. The government considered emigration as a loss to Australia, particularly as the emigrants were predominantly British, Dutch and West German (the preferred immigrants) and the need for a workforce and increased population was still paramount. Other
emigrants such as the Italians were not going back to better conditions in their own country. They were leaving because they were not enjoying their experience in Australia as migrants. The Australian bureaucrats realised that the migration enterprise was losing some of its certainty, in particular the belief that newcomers were assured of a better life in Australia.

By the early 1960s the government was competing with other countries for immigrants and was now considering migrants from areas previously excluded because of their perceived difficulties in assimilating. In the process of negotiating on a world stage for immigrants, Australian government officials became aware that their policies were considered anachronistic and backward. Migration practice throughout the world in the 1960s was one which acknowledged diversity. Australia became known for its 'white Australia policy' which particularly acted against Australia's desire to forge links with Asia.

Australia clearly needed to revise the immigration policy; which meant better services for migrants on arrival and the broadening of notions of who were acceptable migrants. During the period of integration Australia accepted immigrants from Lebanon and Turkey as well as India, Malaysia, China and South America. The implications of the need for more equity for migrants meant that Australian society had to acknowledge its diverse composition, the very phenomenon that Australia had tried to avoid. For Australians, although there was a growing acceptance of the non-British migrant presence, the 'Australian way of life' was still a sacred icon.

The government decided to revise its immigration policies in a cautious but significant way. Instead of maintaining the patronising position exemplified by

![Figure 3 Old market place and shopping area, Haymarket, Sydney.](image)
the Citizenship Conventions and the Good Neighbour Movement, the government created welfare grants which immigrant community agencies could administer within their own communities. This empowered the immigrant groups and increased their political voice. Two strong immigrant associations emerged at this time: CO AS IT (an Italian society) and the Australian-Greek Welfare Society. As well, the government re-assessed its policies on overseas professional qualifications, thus enabling many professional migrants to move from factory work into their own professions.

In the light of these changes it was clear to immigrant groups that by the mid-1960s the mainstream Australian culture was ready to accept the presence of non-British migrants and to accept evidence of different cultural practices. This resulted in a new form of migrant places. There was suddenly a growth of immigrant clubs with a highly visible presence. Greek clubs, Italian clubs, Yugoslavian clubs and so on were built in styles designed to exhibit difference. Not only did the clubs look different, they encouraged new sporting activities which challenged a closely valued aspect of the Australian way of life, rugby union football. Previously, when a student requested to be allowed to play soccer at school, he was informed 'that is not a game, it's foreign; it's un-Australian to play soccer!'. By the mid-1960s soccer was being played on local playing fields, particularly in migrant neighbourhoods. In the 1990s a number of the early immigrant clubs are being demolished. Migrant groups need the opportunity to consider what kind of heritage places they would like to retain for later generations.

Similarly, immigrant places of worship, particularly those associated with Eastern European faiths, were built in forms which were similar to those in the countries of origin. They were, however, variations on the churches from the former countries and these variations were part of the migrant heritage. For example, Italian-Australian tiling companies supplied and installed the religious mosaics in the Greek Orthodox churches.

But perhaps the most obvious and interesting migrant places for the mainstream Australian culture were the local immigrant shopping centres. These places had been relatively inconspicuous during the period of assimilation, but by the 1960s the shops were clearly catering for specific immigrant groups often with signage on the outside in other languages. Above the shops were lawyers and tax accountants who assisted the immigrants with official documents. Language was one of the fundamental barriers for non-English speaking immigrants. Assimilation policies had been inflexible about the necessity for migrants to speak English but offered minimal services. This inevitably led to people gravitating to places where their language was spoken as people went about their everyday life: hence the importance of migrant shopping areas.

Apart from the large migrant clubs, the specific places of worship for immigrants and the local immigrant shopping centres, other migrant places were becoming clearly differentiated. A number of immigrants were now free of their obligation
to work in the factories and had started their own businesses. Many of the southern Italian migrants bought land on the fringes of the large cities where they established market gardens. This was also true of the Croatians and the Maltese who developed large chicken farms. As a result, the tradition of Chinese market gardeners, who had provisioned the east coast Australian communities for most of the second half of the 19th century, changed and the main market places were now centres of both European and Asian vegetable merchants. Sydney has virtually lost the inner city markets, but Melbourne's markets are highly valued as part of the richness of the urban landscape.

During the 1960s migrants had also developed particular recreation places. The parklands associated with the harbour beaches in Sydney became sites of large Italian or Greek picnics, while in the cities individual northern Italians had established sophisticated restaurants and nightclubs. As well, the growing acceptance by the Australian community of the immigrant groups encouraged them to hold annual balls in major town halls. The migrant presence was both embracing the Australian way of life, particularly in terms of sport and outdoor recreation, and being embraced by the Australian community in terms of a growing acceptance of new foods and a more sophisticated night life. Such a cautious acceptance of the migrant presence, while maintaining that the Australian way of life was paramount, continued until 1972 when Australia moved into a third set of policies about migrants. This was known as the period of multiculturalism.

The period of multiculturalism: 1972 to 1995

In 1970, the Australian Labour Party (ALP) saw that non-English-speaking-background migrants were predominantly working class and therefore potential ALP voters. The ALP set about to woo the migrant vote, and their success in the 1972 elections was in part attributable to this vote. In 1973, along with the change in government there was also a major global change resulting from the recession in world trade following the slump in oil prices. As well, the plight of refugees from Lebanon and Vietnam had to be addressed. This was to have a marked impact on immigration issues in Australia. Firstly, it brought to an end the economic boom which had been the rationale for the immigration policy and secondly, Australia accepted its obligation to take in refugees from Asia and Lebanon. The new Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, had a history of activism about migrant issues. In 1973 he was the first person to use the term ‘multiculturalism’ in Australia in his publication A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future. The ALP at this stage, however, was not focusing on multiculturalism but on improving the welfare and education systems for migrants.

In 1975 there was a change of government and under a Liberal Coalition new policies were developed about migration. Firstly, the migrant intake was increased, particularly the refugees from Indo-China and Lebanon. Secondly,
the Liberal Government sought the support of ethnic community leaders because the Liberal platform inevitably meant the abandoning of welfare measures introduced by the former government. To address this the Liberal Government redefined multiculturalism to emphasise cultural pluralism and the key role that ethnic organisations played in providing welfare to their communities. Migrant welfare was removed from the main social welfare system and delegated to ethnic groups through a system of grants.

Included in the new government’s changes was a redefinition of the Australian identity as an ethnically diverse society. The Government set up the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) with programming which was so intriguing that the mainstream Australian community became increasingly interested in the cultural pluralism within its midst. The new government system was a clever strategy where there was simultaneously an ideological legitimation of an ethnically diverse society, cuts in government expenditure and greater social control over minority groups through a system of grants.

In 1983 a Labor government was elected who continued the previous government’s policies on migration, as well as instituting the Ethnic Affairs Commission. In 1984, Australia went into a minor recession and the great immigration debate started, fuelled by Geoffrey Blainey and his rhetoric about the ‘Asianisation of Australia’. Although Blainey appeared to get public support, which prompted the government to cut funding to immigrant groups and abolish the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, it was a misreading of Australian public sentiment. As a result, a number of marginal seats in the larger cities were threatened. The Government responded rapidly by establishing the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the National Agenda for Multicultural Australia. Such was the change in Australian cultural values.
During the period known as 'Multiculturalism', migrant places took on a new dimension. Because of the heightened awareness of the exotic aspects of immigrant cultures stimulated by the programs on SBS television, mainstream Australians began to use the migrant shopping centres as recreation. As well, migrant groups no longer felt they had to conceal the evidence of their cultures; so self-conscious expressions of ethnicity were evident in houses, shops and restaurants and soon their was a growing commodification of ethnicity for the tourist market. This was particularly evident in the revitalisation of 'Chinatowns' in Sydney and Melbourne, and in the creation of new 'Chinatowns' in other cities purely for the tourist market.

Meanwhile, the intake of refugees from Lebanon added to the existing Middle East communities and resulted in areas of Sydney developing centres for Muslim worship, with highly visible mosques and audible calls to prayer in the streets. As well, the Vietnamese community established a commercially successful Vietnamese retail centre close to the hostel they had used on arrival. The centre in Sydney known as Cabramatta became the focus of local government initiatives to highlight the Asian qualities by installing ceremonial gates as entries to new street plazas. These were the result of funding partnerships between Vietnamese commercial interests and Australian community groups; in particular the powerful Returned Servicemen's League (RSL). Also, many of the earlier migrants had now consolidated their assets and were building large houses in the outer areas of the older cities. Associated with the relocation of these groups, new immigrant clubs were built with exotic representations of their former countries. Other aspects of the celebration of multiculturalism are still emerging. Older commercial centres for the Italians and Greeks have become restaurant strips with commodified representations of...
Italianness and Greekness. Along with the hyper-real representations of a stereotyped form of Italianness or Chineseness. There are, however, other unselfconscious blendings of culture. This is evident in a number of aspects of cultural production and is possibly the most interesting aspects of Australian multiculturalism.

It is clear that the recent shift in perceptions of Australia as a place of cultural pluralism and tolerance tends to overlook the history of racism and discrimination. The history of the postwar migration program has resulted in a number of places which are of heritage significance to both the migrant groups and the Australian society as a whole. It is therefore interesting to look at the loss of migrant heritage places over the last 15 years.

During the 1980s, the urban redevelopment in the cities resulted in the loss of many of the immigrant places associated with the early postwar period. Many of the early specialist shops were located in low rent inner-city areas. The first shop to sell coffee, the Greek restaurants, the Italian-owned nightclub, the luxurious ballroom in the centre of Sydney, the 1930 art deco cinemas which screened migrant films, are just some of the places which disappeared in the new urban site amalgamations which enabled high-rise towers. Even the changed urban design guidelines of the late 1980s, requiring continuous street facades, did nothing to save buildings containing migrant heritage because heritage at that time only reflected Anglo-Celtic history. Similarly, the growth of suburban shopping malls resulted in the loss of immigrant shopping centres. The outer suburbs containing market gardens have disappeared under new housing developments, often made up of mansions built by the immigrants of the 1950s. Such is the contested nature of migrant heritage places.
Meanwhile in the 1990s the major industrial projects in the older cities which grew as a result of migrant labour are now derelict and in the process of being demolished. Associated with such post-industrialisation is the loss of work resulting in the loss of meaning where migrant work places reflected the relationship between work, home and community. The new sites of employment are in the tourist industry where ethnicity is commodified. The Chinatown redevelopment are often carried out at the expense of the history of the Chinese in such areas. This is also happening in the older Italian areas. Not all the Chinese or Italians agree with the appropriation of their heritage by entrepreneurs, although many do and have actively participated in the process. These sites of contested values are of interest to a number of Australian cultural geographers.

The concept of Australian migrant heritage places is a fluid one. It represents the changing nature of places created by migrants during the different periods of the migrant project. It also represents the changing concept of the Australian identity where places often celebrate cultural pluralism. Associated with the understanding of migrant places is a history of contested values related to the acceptance of difference. Recent research is facilitating an understanding of migrant values related to their heritage places in Australia. This is contributing invaluable knowledge about the nature of the migrant experience for different immigrant groups and the rich meanings associated with many Australian places.

bibliography


endnotes