Cultural Pluralism in Design in the Australian Public Realm
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Introduction
Landscape design in Australia currently is perceived to be dominated by two main design approaches; the corporate ethic emerging predominantly from United States and some European models, and the perceived Australian landscape design ethic seen as abstract representations of the Australian landscape. There are also new design approaches emerging from a group of designers who are migrants or children of migrants. These designers are working in a cross-cultural way which has the potential to become a uniquely Australian design ethic for the 21st century.

Proposal for Melbourne Docklands

Darling Harbour, Sydney 2000

The Interplay of Meanings
The design of the public realm of Australian cities reflects these approaches, but it can also be considered as an artful play between meanings, some of which are easily recognised while others are hidden and are known only to selected players. The interplay between obvious and hidden meanings not only resonate in the Australian public realm today, they also reflect a continual interplay between hidden and obvious meanings sustained over time. Although the public realm reflects the aspirations of British colonisers, there is also a dialogue between what the public realm means to mainstream Australian culture and what it means to recent immigrants. All of these meanings have been shifting and continue to shift and it is the committed designer who is most able to play with this flickering text in a creative way.

Australian Paperbark Forest, Darling Harbour 2000

Despite the obvious beauty of the major public realm in a city such as Sydney and its harbour, there are many aspects to the public realm in Australian cities which are
less obvious and which are in a process of change. This change is not so much in physical form but rather it is a change in meanings. For example over the last two hundred years, the Aboriginal relationship to the public realm has shifted from landscape meanings to urban meanings hidden in the city fabric. To this can be added the overt meanings reflected in contemporary urban Aboriginal expressions in the public realm. Social history is embedded in Australian urban landscapes which make memories cohere in complex ways where peoples' experiences of the public realm can intertwine sense of place with the politics of space. There is currently an interesting flickering of meanings between the Aboriginal political murals in the streets of Redfern, Sydney and the elegant art collaboration installed on First Government House site.

![King St, Newtown](sydney-city.blogspot.com)

![Edge of the Trees by Lawrence & Foley](sydney-city.blogspot.com)

In her book, *The Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden (1995) suggests that there should be a stronger connection between scholarship in urban landscape history and the work on cultural identity and this connection needs to inform the practice of urban design. Her book describes the rich culture of the enclaves developed by different minorities in Los Angeles. One can see some parallels with Sydney and Melbourne as multicultural places but there are also important differences.

![Middle East Picnic, Cabarita Park](sydney-city.blogspot.com)

![Vietnamese Street Life, Cabramatta](sydney-city.blogspot.com)

Meanwhile the European colonists, who created Australian cities, lay the foundations for a public realm which has changed from grand eighteenth century utopian visions, never realised, to the boom and bust representations of public space during the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century the boom or bust exuberances were followed by a self-conscious and more constrained city within a
federation of states. This uniqueness is now threatened by a possible disappearance into global virtual reality in the twenty-first century.

Big Ned or Ubiquitous Palms on the beachside

This project seeks to contribute an understanding of the Australian design profession which may save the Australian public realm from becoming a bland homogeneous place of universal icons exemplified by the shopping mall and the new planned urban precincts. The public realm is full of vibrant meanings attributable to the new immigrant groups whose presence in certain places can be clearly read in particular urban landscapes. Multicultural Sydney and Melbourne, and to a lesser extent other major Australian cities, are rich and diverse places where immigrant groups have created a public realm representing a cacophony of different voices, not as ghettos so characteristic of North American urban places, but as complex enclaves of an extraordinary blending of cultures. These are dynamic places which are constantly changing as the process of migration results in a certain sequence of place making, whether it is the alterations to housing or new places of worship or the new shops in the local streets which unselfconsciously reflect exotic life styles.

New Australian Lebanese Houses, San Souci Sydney

Australian cities are becoming known as multicultural playgrounds and culture-hungry tourists are being lured to these urban places to graze and participate in the vibrant street life. Entrepreneurs are rapidly marketing their own brand of multiculturalism; exaggerated versions of Italianness in Leichhardt and Coburg, Chineseness in Haymarket, Vietnameseness in Cabramatta and Darra, Arabic exoticism in Lakemba and so on.
Such commodified self-consciousness can only undermine the true richness of Australia’s cultural diversity. Much of the powerful sense of place which exists in Sydney and Melbourne’s immigrant centres has developed as a result of migration during a period of assimilationist policies when people were compelled to become 'New Australians'. As a result immigrants sought solace for the enforced relinquishing of their cultural identity by creating relatively hidden cultural enclaves. The majority of the population of Sydney and Melbourne, and to a lesser extent other Australian cities, did not know about these places until gentrification pushed into the inner suburbs. The risk now is that these places will be appropriated by the middle class gentrifiers and Local Government planners who seek to capitalise on the tourist potential of such places. There is clearly a push to ‘upgrade’ them into bigger and better examples of ethnicity and so killing the goose that lay the golden egg.

But one golden egg has hatched into another aspect of Australian multiculturalism. Cultural diversity as a result of migration is not just evident in the so-called 'ethnic' centres. The whole of Australian cultural life has been enriched by the complex interaction of immigrants from highly diverse backgrounds. Many Australian designers, architects, landscape architects, urban designers, artists, film makers, and writers now come from diverse backgrounds, some as first generation immigrants and others as children of immigrants.

Today multiculturalism in Australia’s public realm is as deeply rooted in mainstream Australian culture as it is in ethnic enclaves. The large Australian cities are providing
opportunities for the blending of design talents which is truly multicultural in a totally unselfconscious way. In Sydney, the Bicentennial Monument in Centennial Park exemplifies the richness of design from culturally plural pulses in the public realm.

Sited in a highly significant place for Anglo-Celtic Australians, namely the site of a temporary monument to Federation erected in 1900, the design combines the talents of two designers with recent immigrant backgrounds. The monument is a collaboration between the architect, Alex Tzannes, an Australian born of Greek immigrant parents who has clearly inherited Greek sensitivities to classical form, and the artistic talents of Imants Tillers, an Australian artist who was born and spent his childhood in Latvia. Imants Tillers restrained and exquisite representation of the ambiguous meanings of Federation in Australia contained within the tiled dome of the monument reveal sensitivity to the complex dynamics of Australians' relationship to place which is perhaps more easily understood by a recent arrival to Australia.

Understanding the different layers of the public realm in Australian cities is not easy. There are many examples of superficial representations of these layers, often in the form of nostalgia. But there are also examples which can take design of the public realm into the next century in exciting and clever ways. Most of these works are collaborations between artists and architects or landscape architects and many of these teams are rich examples of cultural pluralism. The Australian public realm is intriguing and one hopes that with the increasing desire to understand the Australian cultural identity, superficial representations of multiculturalism in urban places will rapidly be superseded by a respect for Australian designers who embody the reality of Australia's cultural diversity.