

## **Interpretation/Translation/Quotation?**

Contemporary Architects' Interventions into Multicultural Australia

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### **Abstract**

*Over the last forty years, Australian cultural identity has moved from being framed as loss - the tyranny of distance between an immigrant population and their mainly British origins - to one of surplus: an overabundance of identities of a hybridising/glocalising populace of diverse origins. Australia's resultant landscapes comprise increasingly complex overlays of cultures and practices, particularly in the larger cities, where a diverse range of communities have created buildings and built environments. Even if facilitated in a pragmatic sense by architects, draftspeople and constructors, Australia's growing number of ethnically-specific buildings continues to exist largely detached from the nation's architectural profession, rarely being evident within its publications or awards systems. Within this context, the paper discusses two of the few instances where architects of note have designed works specific to multicultural Melbourne: Gregory Burgess' Victoria Street Gateway in Richmond Victoria and Hassell's Afghan Bazaar Cultural Precinct in Dandenong Victoria. In considering these projects, we focus on three of the many questions these projects raise about Melbourne's (and more broadly Australia's) architectural identity and the boundaries they blur between architectural and extra-architectural modes of working within the built environment: firstly, is the manner of these projects' formal and aesthetic composition interpretation, translation or quotation? Secondly, are these projects marginal to the broader concerns of Melbourne architecture or are they central to a multicultural that will become more central to its architects in future? And finally, are the concerns of these projects new or are they more an updating of the postmodernist valorisation of the Australian suburb (as championed in the 1970s and 1980s by Edmond & Corrigan and others) in a manner that reflects the cultural differences now present within these suburbs?*

## Introduction

The increasing heterogeneity of Australia's demography, combined with the decreased marginalisation of Asian and other ethnicities within Australia have led to the promotion of a multicultural 'mosaic' as the preferred model for the nation's immigrant society. Allied to the increased commercial and touristic potential of areas of minority community identity, the definition of geographical areas with Australia cities (from the long-established "Chinatowns" to newer "Little Saigons", "Little Indias" etc.) increased greatly in the 1980 and 1990s.<sup>1</sup> While the political impetus for multiculturalism has since wavered, the symbolic purpose of such identifications remains strong, as does their commercial potential.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, greater specificity is increasingly manifesting, making distinctions within regional or national categories in favour of local regional or sub-national identities: Thai, Viet, or Singaporean rather than "Chinese" or "Asian"; Calabrese, Pugliese or Siciliano rather than "Mediterranean" or "Italian". The recent suggestions in Sydney by Thai and Korean businesses that a "Thai town" and a "Korea town" be established are clearly representative of self-commodification of ethnicity.<sup>3</sup>

This leads to the tricky issue of how architecture relates to the identification of particular physical locations with particular ethnicities and cultures. More fundamentally it leads to the question of how contemporary architecture (designed by architects, produced under the technological and economic conditions of commodification) relates to any cultural epistemology or be allegorical or catechistic in relation to any cultural system,<sup>4</sup> let alone the complications of a multicultural society. In the following discussion, we explore this territory through two recent examples of ethnic placemaking projects in Melbourne by Australian architects: the Victoria St Gateway in Richmond and the Afghan Bazaar in Thomas St, Dandenong. Both these project focus on urban public spaces of exchange and encounter, and so provide both answers and questions in relation to how architects can negotiate the representation of cultural identity in an environment of complex and evolving demography.

### Victoria Street Gateway

Victoria Street Richmond is long-established in Melbourne's consciousness as a Vietnamese place, with many restaurants and groceries serving both a local and more distant Vietnamese-Australian communities across Melbourne. The Tet Lunar New Year festival was established in Richmond in 1994. It is one of seven of sites where South East Asian lunar new year festivals are held in high street spaces, the others being at Springvale, Glen Waverley, Box Hill, St. Albans, Footscray and Chinatown in Melbourne's CBD. These festivals make up almost a quarter of the street-based festivals held in Melbourne annually.

The Victoria St Gateway project was an initiative of the City of Yarra and the Richmond Asian Business Association and involved an intensive community collaboration process.<sup>5</sup> According to its architect, Gregory Burgess (a winner of Australia's highest honour, the RAI Gold Medal in 2004), the project is focused on "Vietnamese and Asian identity, culture and tradition [...] creates a setting for major street festivals and provides a safe and vibrant space for the wider community".<sup>6</sup> In line with these aspirations, the project was conceived to encompass the 820m section of Victoria St from Hoddle St to Church St where most of the Asian businesses are located. Due to the close overhead rail bridge and the widening out of the street between it and Hoddle Street, there was already in effect a gateway at the eastern end of the street. The project was to have been built in two phases: phase 1 comprised a zone about 150m long incorporating a gateway structure (a flying boat) facing Hoddle St, some artworks on and beneath the rail bridge and a series of pieces (conical "hats") suspended over the roadway either side of the rail bridge. Phase two of the project comprised continuing the suspended 'hats' along the street and some minor streetscaping elements. When the gateway opened in January 2014, it was a reduced version of phase one, with no suspended 'hats' beyond the rail bridge, meaning that the design only occupies the space between the bridge and Hoddle St. This reinforces a sense of the design as a "thick" gateway. The project was submitted for an AIA urban design award, but did not even garner a commendation.



**Figure 1 (left).** Victoria Street Gateway Arch, Richmond, Victoria (image by author). **Figure 2 (right).** Victoria Street Gateway, Image of Dong Son Drum under railway bridge (image by authors).

### Thomas Street Afghan Bazaar

Dandenong, thirty-seven kilometres south east of Melbourne's CBD, has for a generation now been one of the most culturally diverse municipalities in Australia. A concentration of manufacturing, relatively affordable housing and long-established migrant hostels has facilitated Dandenong's transformation from a country town to the most culturally diverse place in Victoria. 60 per cent of the local population were born overseas, with 64% speaking languages other than English. Among the more than 150 birthplaces represented, large numbers were born in Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, India, China, Italy, Greece, Bosnia and Afghanistan. People from Afghanistan comprise 1.61% of the population across the Greater Dandenong municipality, being particularly concentrated in the centre and southern area of Dandenong, where they reach more than 12% of the resident population. The majority of Victoria's Afghani community live in Dandenong, which is the second largest outside New South Wales, with most having arrived as refugees and asylum seekers.

Thomas Street, one block west of Lonsdale St, Dandenong's main street, has developed a concentration of Afghan cafes, restaurants and groceries, along with social support services. To "better define the area's Afghan identity", the City of Greater Dandenong and Victoria's Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship hired global Australian design firm Hassell to "create a place the local Afghan community could be proud of, and an attractive destination for visitors and tourists",<sup>7</sup> for a 220m section of Thomas St. between Scott and Walker Streets. The project is proclaimed to be "Melbourne's only recognised Afghan precinct",<sup>8</sup> and involved a "collaborative effort between traders, community leaders and precinct stakeholders and the end result is a vibrant precinct which celebrates the Afghan people".<sup>9</sup>

Early images of project sketches show a gateway-like "central feature" with areas of patterned paving and seating. The built design is primarily about patterned ground surfaces and public sitting platforms, with the "central feature" being turned into a vertical lantern asymmetrically placed within the streetscape. The patterning is a "contemporary interpretation",<sup>10</sup> of the tiling on Afghanistan's Mazar-e-Sharif (Blue Mosque), a reference felt to express diversity as well as unity among Afghan people. The design is intended to provide "infrastructure for community festivals ... such as Nowruz (New Year)".<sup>11</sup> Although the project opened in 2014, a new year festival is yet to be held there. The project has received three awards – AILA Awards for Design (2014) and for Excellence for Communities (2016) and a Local Government Professionals Award for Excellence in Community Assets and

Infrastructure (2015). The AILA citation notes how the design moves “beyond the often literal clichés of ethnic branding and explores multicultural notions of place and space in our public streetscape environments” as a result of stakeholder “discontent with previous attempts at placemaking”.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 3 (left).** Thomas Street Afghan Bazaar, ‘The Lamp’ centrepiece by artist Akram Aslam, Dandenong, Victoria (image by authors). **Figure 4 (right).** Thomas Street Afghan Bazaar, bench.

#### **Formal and Aesthetic Composition: Interpretation, Translation or Quotation?**

These two projects could be more simply considered as formal/physical gateways to cultures from outside Australia. And as gateways they have both literal and metaphorical meanings as expressions of cultural identity and difference. Thus, our initial discussion focuses on some of meanings inherent in the use of gateways or other physical elements as cultural/spatial markers within urban environments.

The free-standing arch component of the Victoria Street Gateway could be seen within a couple of overlapping contexts. In the West, the ceremonial arch or gate originated with the Romans, who used the free-standing arch to link a location with an event (such as victory in a battle or accession of an emperor). The term *arcus* referred to the confluence of these elements, and so to both image and presence of a free-standing gateway (especially an arched gateway) became synonymous with a ceremonial demonstration of power and a perceptual and symbolic threshold. Disassociated with being a literal entry point (as many who encounter such a structure skirt around it rather than passing under it), the freestanding gateway takes on a kind of spatial omnipotence, and its Imperial overtones meant that in the Australian,<sup>13</sup> New Zealand and Canadian contexts, the use of ceremonial arches seems to have been relatively common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Australia, celebrating Federation seems to have provided a particular motivation for construction of multiple ceremonial gateways, and given the implications for their future in the new country, it is interesting to note how many such ceremonies included a Chinese example.<sup>14</sup>

However, these temporary structures need to be distinguished from permanent gateways or physical markers, such as those often found at the peripheries of Chinatowns, which despite being free-standing often do demarcate zones of difference. In this positioning, gateways to ethnic precincts serve as markers and obvious thresholds between one kind of territory and another. On one side is the generalised “host” majoritarian city and on the other side is the conspicuous otherness of a Chinatown, Little Saigon etc. For outsiders, the implied threshold provided by a gateway or other marker structure conveys a mixture of meanings. Firstly, there is a conflation of Western traditions for constructing ceremonial gateways with the more specific demarcation implied by the foreignness of a

particular structure) and secondly there is the gateway/marker's positioning between a generalised urban landscape and one dominated by ethnically-specific businesses.

From the point of view of cultural insiders within an ethnic precinct, such connotations may also apply, but may also have culturally specific meanings. While traditional ethnic precincts were enclaves in the sense that people lived and worked within defined areas – brought together by the need for mutual support of both an economic and a social kind, often in the face of hostility from the majority community, the government-sanctioned demarcation of such precincts has come much later, under social conditions where at least part of the presence of ethnic minorities (notably their cuisine) have come to be celebrated as places of an alluring rather than threatening otherness. The gateway to Victoria Street can be seen as being within a particular architectural lineage, an adaptation of a particular Sino-Vietnamese tradition of constructing gateways (despite its individual boat-like expression, which will be discussed later in this paper). Firstly, the gateway may be related, via the influence of China on Vietnamese architecture, as a form of *paifang* or *pailou*, a term that alludes to the original purpose of such a structure as gateway and marker to a particular *fang*, or traditional city district.<sup>15</sup> Major examples marked the cardinal directions in the major axes of Chinese urban grids, and took on particular meanings depending on which direction they faced and the rites associated with these directions.<sup>16</sup> The free-standing gate may also be related to the Buddhist *torana* gate (as found in the early sanctuary of Sanchi as well as other Buddhist, Hindu and Jain sites in India, and brought to Vietnam with the advent of Buddhism), as well as the Japanese *torii* (which allies Hindu/Buddhist cosmology with traditional Shinto notions of thresholds between the quotidian and the spirit realms). The presence of *paifang* in Melbourne's Vietnamese temple precincts reinforces this latent meaning.

### **Marginality or Multicultural Centrality?**

These two projects are at the margins of centres within Melbourne. Victoria Street lies on the margins of Melbourne's CBD. Thomas Street is but one block back from the main thoroughfare of Melbourne's "second city", or as Beza puts it "the heart of south-east Melbourne",<sup>17</sup> a centre that has been the recipient of significant state urban renewal programs over the last generation. The celebration of streets as authentic places of cultural encounter is a theme that is perhaps so ubiquitous and quotidian that it is rarely noted. In the post-war era, against the increasing dominance of the private car, there has been a growing trend of streetspace reclamation across Melbourne through the use of festivals, many of them in the name of a singular ethnic or regional group, some expressive of multicultures of various kinds, others of a variety of festive occasions. This points to a centrality of dispersed differences, where the diverse identities and identifications of localities is increasingly one of the most recognisable elements of urban public life in Melbourne. Whether this continues to engage the attention of noted architects and the awards system may be too early to tell, since as a senior associate says of the Afghan Bazaar says, it's "a very small project, just a small suburban streetscape".<sup>18</sup>

However, aiming at a narrative and having it received are different things in something as multivalent as architecture. What locals and visitors read into the Vietnamese arch cannot be controlled and might relate as much to the predispositions of particular viewers as to the architects' or clients' intentions. At first glance, its questionable whether the arch over Victoria Street doesn't evoke Vietnameseness. Its boat-like form does not immediately reference Viet architecture. In referencing a boat, it could be read as representing the passage by boat of many of the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants to Australia, but this is not culturally specific. Reading the arch's associated elements provides clearer evidence of the generation of the boat-form. Representations of Dong Son drums are mounted to the supports of the adjacent railway bridge. These drums originated in the bronze age in the area of what is now central Vietnam and are noted for amongst other things their representations of boat-like forms that also resemble the roof shapes still constructed by various cultures in Southeast Asia. Parsing this confluence of influences implies a broader reading to the

gateway project. The Dong Son drums, despite originating in what is now Vietnam, were valued trade items and have been found all over Southeast Asia as far as southeast Indonesia. Their evocation suggests metaphorically a couple of things. Firstly, the roof-boat form as a cultural/material/physical connection across Southeast Asia and beyond (connecting architecture with the literal boats of migrants ancient and modern). Alternatively, the gateway could be read as a more pan-Asian symbol, where Vietnameseness is diffused into a more general (and perhaps inclusive) East/Southeast Asian identity, encompassing of other regional ethnicities and communities, including the Malaysian, Singaporean, Korean and Thai businesses in immediate vicinity.

In any case, the architectural demarcation of ethnic/cultural minority precincts that both projects represent can be related to two points. Firstly, there is the question of the reification of identity through overt reference to a particular place of origin, and how this relates to the attempts of minority immigrants to be accepted as intrinsic members of the majority community. This could be seen as archaic and regressive stereotyping, valorising a past with undesirable cultural, political, historical connotations for contemporary people and reducing the multivalency and dynamism of a diverse localised culture to a simplistic set of motifs. It could be argued in most identified precincts that a culturally singular piece of architecture doesn't properly represent the real heterogeneity of the local community, so is at best of marginal relevance, and at worst a deterrent to businesses and to traders that do not self-identify with the architecture's references.<sup>19</sup>

However historically such gateways are at least the partial products of lobbying/fund-raising on the part of a local minority communities,<sup>20</sup> and this was the case of both the Victoria Street and Thomas Street projects. This may be because in an arguably more multicultural environment, the overly ethnically specific architecture of a Vietnamese or Afghan gateway serves as a branding of minority identity. Their obvious exoticism provides signage for the more generic architecture within their precincts. A stroll down Victoria Street or Thomas Street reveals remarkably almost no "Vietnamese-" or "Afghan-looking" buildings. Most of the cultural/ethnic identification comes with signage and the types of foodstuffs and other products on display and the architectonically themed framing for the commercial activity being undertaken in their vicinity is now provided by these gateway structures.

From a commercial point of view, such architectural branding can be seen as advantageous. Whatever its other connotations, the presence of an ethnically-marked gateway indicates a point of difference for a particular precinct, so not only an attractor of potential customers within a competitive business environment but also a way (via the subsequent economic advantage) for the local community to gain some political influence.<sup>21</sup> The commodification of culture represented by these structures is not necessarily externally applied as there can be a clear link between representing culture, selling culture and the economic health of a community. Essentially ethnic precincts are commercial streets, where whether by design or circumstance, cultural content is an intrinsic part of commerce. People, be they Vietnamese, Afghan or otherwise, come to Victoria Street or Thomas Street to buy Vietnamese or Afghan produce and eat Vietnamese or Afghan meals. The fundamental aim of many immigrants is to make a living, and while they are disadvantaged in many spheres (whether due to unfamiliarity with local processes, prejudice and racism, their business point-of-difference is based on the ethnic identification and providing (within a multicultural society) products identified with this that appeal to both insiders and outsiders. Being entrepreneurial is something that is both attractive to, but also sometimes forced on immigrants from minority communities,<sup>22</sup> and that entrepreneurialism is often based on cultural embeddedness,<sup>23</sup> that eventually leads to such precincts being important sites for city economies as they attract both locals and outsider visitors in what is often called cultural tourism.<sup>24</sup> The publicity material for both the Victoria Street and Thomas Street projects makes it evident that this is an important aspect for both projects. This association with commerce is critical and can be reinforced by two points. Firstly, while there may be concentrations of certain ethnic minorities within particular residential areas, there are never arches or gateways to demarcate such residential concentrations. Secondly, while the majority of businesses within certain

commercial precincts may be from a particular ethnic minority background, this is rarely absolute (as previously mentioned, Victoria Street contains a variety of other Asian as well as Caucasian-Australian businesses, as does Thomas Street).

### **Conclusion: Architectural Quotation Today**

As Mazumdar *et al*, suggest, “There is a difference between an observer claiming that architecture is a connotative symbol that the observer is reading, and a group using architecture as a communication device”.<sup>25</sup> The relationships between ethnically-specific architecture and life within ethnic minority areas is complex, and architecture that functions as an attractor may assist the economic ambitions of a community while being questionable in its relation to that community’s actual culture. There is also the reifying tendency for such architecture, whatever the reasons for instigation, to come to stand for more than these reasons. In Mazumdar *et al*’s study of Los Angeles’ Little Saigon they came to the conclusion that the area’s culturally distinctive architecture had meaning for both residents/traders within the area and those within the wider diasporic Vietnamese-American community, and this meaning was based in the ability of architectural elements such as arches and curving roofs to both evoke nostalgia for Vietnam and to “engrave” Vietnamese identity in their new place of settlement. In this respect, they describe Little Saigon as ‘somewhere in the middle on the continuum from one culture to another’, with architecture functioning as a mnemonic bridge between these two cultures.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the formal and aesthetic composition in both projects goes beyond mere quotation to combine interpretations and translations of concepts, traditions, elements, motifs, symbols and narratives. Built form as a communicative form necessarily involves multivalency and multimodality. In relation to the Victoria Street gateway, the architect Greg Burgess speaks of using “inspiration images”, and of celebration and welcome through “cultural resonance” that is “metaphoric” having “multiple readings, [a] non-literal translation”.<sup>27</sup> While the imagery of boats, tigers and hats is recognisable, they are not literal representations, elements have been abstracted and used in new ways that transform both the source imagery and the places in which they are set. In this, these quotations have a mutability and transformative agency much like those whose journeys and lives they seek to celebrate, becoming a vehicle expressive of the aspirations of migrants.

In a similar vein, Hassell assert that their Afghan Bazaar is both “interpretation” and “reinterpretation”,<sup>28</sup> suggestive of multiple iterations of citation, mutation and re-working. Sources of quotations are “inspiration” for Hassell (rather than merely rules for repetition, recitation or regurgitation), that can be given a “contemporary spin” to create a “geometry of gathering” in the streetscape.<sup>29</sup> This elision of the world of communications (public relations, advertising) through the use of “spin” with urban design is read positively by the AILA jury, whose design award citation asserts that the streetscape has “successfully moved beyond the clichés of precinct branding”.<sup>30</sup> Notably, this is not to condemn the act of place branding, once regarded as suspiciously inauthentic, but rather to praise it for lack of cliché.

For Beza, Hassell’s intervention has “recast” Thomas St “as an authentic venue for public life, community identity, unity and pride” through the use of ‘references’ drawn from the “palette and patterns of traditional afghan motifs”.<sup>31</sup> While we are not questioning the award-worthiness of the work, this kind of eulogising discourse mixes desires for authenticity with the normalization of branding practices without the ironic self-awareness of postmodernism. There are also traits of what Hage called ‘good white multiculturalism’,<sup>32</sup> wherein the masterful intervention of white experts (in this case, the architects) is the secret ingredient to achieving the fullness of authentic belonging and harmony, implying that this was not in existence prior to the completion of the project. This seems to express the desires of those who are visitors to Dandenong to be able to read into the quotation an entire world, suggesting that a few decorated paving tiles or a lamp can stand for the richness of entire cultures.

We might connect this discussion to Ang's analysis of ethnic self-commodification in Australian urban environments discussed earlier in this paper.<sup>33</sup> Ang draws on the ideas of the Comaroffs whose coining of the branding and commodification of cultures as 'Ethnicity, Inc.' suggests both the negative – the simplistic reduction of cultures to brands and theming – and the positive – the marketplace as an arena where ethnic subjects can benefit from presenting their social and cultural patterns in consumable forms.<sup>34</sup> In this, they suggest that identity has become an intrinsic part of the contemporary economy, that in a world of increasingly mobile and diffused relationships, at least for the urban middle classes of large cities, "the identity economy feeds, and feeds off, a deep ambivalence in modern life: a sense of exile from 'authentic' being that seeks to requite itself in encounters with 'authentic' otherness - albeit in consumable form".<sup>35</sup> There are both displacements and (re)stabilisations of meaning in these situations.

The question might be asked here of how contemporary architecture relates in general to dealing with a diversified urban environment. What sort of understanding can architecture, embedded as it still is in its Modernist tradition of autonomy (despite 'regionalist' nods to material contextualization), have on a multicultural context? More broadly, the extra-architectural aspects of a multicultural precinct serve to pose a question that could be asked of any form of architectural production: what is the difference between a tradition and a cliché, and when does it matter? When focusing discussion of the Victoria Street and Thomas Street projects on the question of quotation in architecture today, the very use of this metaphor begs the broader question: is all contemporary architecture (including Modernist architecture) really just postmodern? Like architectures elsewhere across the globe, we can see after several decades of intensifying globalisation and moreover, glocalisation, that much contemporary architecture in Australia references older buildings. Many new buildings quote, sometimes at length, and with almost complete lack of irony, the history of Modernism in Australia and overseas. Modernism thus now constitutes an architectural tradition, a style rather than a spatio-temporally specific 'spirit'. Its oldest forms are over a century old and still provide the basis for inspiration, homage and mimesis for contemporary architects. The archive of modernism now provides a lexicon of forms, gestures, details and compositional strategies. Some are associated with political and social ideals, others with artistic moments. But what does their usage mean today? Is it a matter of appropriation of forms for stylistic ends? If it is homage, then to what and for whom? Is it an attempt to ingest and re-enact the ideals of the original?

Arguably all contemporary architectural expression could be described as exemplifying quotation – that is, the act of re-enacting (saying, making, performing) the works of others from elsewhere in time and space, to position both designer and consumer within a distinct cultural lineage. For Australian architects, what is quoted is to do a particular kind of cultural belonging, rather than a placeless neutral act. In this view of quotation in architecture, it is most of what goes on across the production of the built environment, nuancing positions of designers and consumers accordingly. In this view, understanding the buildings and projects of, by and for minority ethnic communities is not marginal, but central to understanding contemporary architectural production in Australia. The multicultural mosaic that is Australian urban culture is being rendered in architectural ways by the proliferation of ethnically-specific precincts and the cultural/commercial need desires to demarcate them using physical elements such as gateways and street furniture. That architects for such these projects have found, whatever the critical reception of their efforts, that the quotation of Modernist antecedents is inadequate to such a task. Accordingly, the questions we ask of these specific projects for ethnic minorities should reflexively enlighten the larger field of mainstream architectural production for multicultural Australia.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>9</sup> Mayor of City of Greater Dandenong, cited in Hassell (2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Hassell (2017).
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- <sup>12</sup> City of Greater Dandenong (CGD), *Afghan Bazaar Cultural Precinct Awards* (2016), webpage notes, accessed 1 February 2017, <http://www.greaterdandenong.com/document/30742/afghan-bazaar-cultural-precinct-awards>
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- <sup>30</sup> CGD 2016
- <sup>31</sup> Beza 2014.
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