signs of italian culture in the urban landscape of carlton

by
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THIS IS PART TWO OF A RESEARCH PROJECT CONDUCTED BY THE AUTHOR IN MELBOURNE IN 2004 IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE INSTITUTE OF HUMAN GEOGRAPHY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MILAN AND WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ITALIAN AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE (IAI) IN MELBOURNE. THE PROJECT WAS SUPPORTED BY A SCHOLARSHIP FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION'S MARCO POLO PROGRAMME. IN CONDUCTING HER RESEARCH, DAL BORGO DREW HEAVILY ON RECORDS FROM THE ITALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION AND ON KEY SOURCES INCLUDING SAGAZIO'S 'A WALK THROUGH ITALIAN CARLTON' (1988) AND 'YULE'S CARLTON: A HISTORY' (2004).

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To understand what Carlton means to the Italians of Melbourne,
one must have experience with emigration;
have suffered the solitude,
the lack of understanding and at times, disdain;
to arrive in a place and feel completely lost.
To feel like a nobody.
Carlton has been the cradle of our migration to Melbourne;
the gathering place for those arriving migrants who knew that someone, somewhere, was waiting for them,
that some voice was speaking the same language.[1]

The area known today as Carlton, a suburb at the northern edge of the city of Melbourne, was originally inhabited by the Wurundjeri people, members of the Woiwurrung language group. European settlement caused irreversible damage to the ecosystem on which the Wurundjeri depended as well as to their social and cultural systems. The colonists claimed Wurundjeri lands for grazing, forcing the traditional owners into areas populated by other clans and into conflict with these communities. Such was the feeling of hopelessness and displacement between the 1840s and 1850s that Wurundjeri parents practiced infanticide. A last vain attempt to regain the land taken by Europeans was met with gunfire. The indigenous community was further ravaged by infectious diseases, such as smallpox, influenza and venereal diseases introduced by the colonisers. By the end of 1850, the remains of the Wurundjeri community had retreated to a small pocket of land to the north of the city. In 1863, by government edict, this group was relocated to a property near Healesville.

The history of Carlton is inexplicably tied to the gold rush and the increasing number of immigrants seeking accommodation in the City of Melbourne. Carlton first appears on a map in the early 1850s as a city extension [2], drawn by General Robert Hoddle as a rectangular grid not unlike that of the city centre. Although a proposal to create a suburb called Carlton was tabled in the Victorian government gazette of 1852 and the sale of plots of land began in the same year, the area continued to be known as North Melbourne. In the two decades that followed, the suburb was transformed by a combination of planned and, at its farthest reaches, unregulated building. Historians dispute the origins of the name Carlton; what is known is that by the 1870s the suburb had taken on the boundaries which identify it today.

From the 1850s to around 1880, wealthy developers bought pockets of land in Carlton on which they constructed homes and factories in bluestone, brick and wood. During this time, the first of the suburb's characteristic Victorian terrace houses appeared. Throughout the nineteenth century *'reverence for Italy and symbols of Italian culture was reflected in the attitudes of middle and upper class Australians and in their fondness for buying Italian goods and emulating Italian cultural styles'*.[3] The bourgeoisie learnt Italian and merchants and farmers built their residences in the 'Italian-style', decorating them with Italian statues, marble and furniture.

Alongside major traffic intersections was a network of secondary streets and lanes and it was here that unregulated building saw the speedy construction of densely packed dwellings amid poor sanitary conditions. These were the so-called slum pockets which would be earmarked for demolition in the 1930s. By the end of World War II, Carlton's demographic makeup consisted mainly of large working class families living in rented Victorian and Edwardian cottages.

From its early days, Carlton has been a neighbourhood of new arrivals: Jews, Italians, Greeks, Lebanese and latterly Ethiopians have made it their first port of call, marking their passage through Carlton with their own indelible style. According to historian Celestina Sagazio, the Italian community established itself in Carlton in three successive waves: the first phase occurred between the second half of the nineteenth century and World War I, the second between the two World Wars and the third after World War II. The earliest arrivals were musicians from Basilicata in the south of Italy, followed by friuliani, trevisani and vicentini from the north. The first arrivals settled in the heart of Carlton and to the south, while those who arrived after World War II, from Sicily, Calabria and Abruzzo, chose the north of Carlton. Together, these migrants formed the Italian community. During the 1950s, the Jewish population began to leave Carlton for other suburbs. These are the years when Italian settlement was at its most conspicuous:

'In the 1950s and 1960s, Carlton became the first and best known "Little Italy" in Australia. It was in many ways the Italians' home away from home. Some historians argue that by 1960 the various groups of Italian migrants had formed an Italo-Australian community. The concept of community was widely used by Italian newspapers, political leaders and by the public. The term embraced all people of Italian descent living in Australia. It assumed that they had more in common with each other than with other Australians'.[4]

At this point one may ask why Carlton was the first port of call for many migrants. The majority of Italians migrating to Australia, as well as to other parts of the globe, did not arrive under the Australian government's Assisted Passage Scheme. Instead, they paid their own way, gravitating to those areas where other Italian migrants, sometimes from the same town, had already established themselves. These established *paesani* helped new arrivals

to find work and accommodation. Chain migration, hostility from the Anglo-Australian community, proximity to employment and the lack of assistance from the Australian government were all factors which guided the Italian migrant to Carlton.

Initially, the majority of Italian migrants were male. Those from the north of Italy found employment in the construction industry, while southerners worked in suburban factories, market gardens or in the hospital and cleaning sectors. Many were musicians, grocers, fruit and vegetable merchants, barbers, restaurateurs and bakers. Migrants from Friuli and Veneto were experts in terrazzo making as well as bricklaying and carpentry. Italian women in the main worked from home, taking in sewing or running boarding houses for newly arrived migrants. From the 1950s onward, many Italian women also found work in the clothing and textile industry.

In 1891, Italians represented 1% of the population of metropolitan Melbourne and even by 1914 their numbers did not exceed 100. However, between 1921 and 1947 the Italian population rose dramatically from 237 to 1,612, and in June 1960 the number soared to 5,000 or 20% of the total population of Carlton. Although these are approximate figures for the municipality as a whole, they indicate a growing Italian presence in the area. As affirmed by demographer F Lancaster Jones:

'In 1945 only 14 shops in Lygon Street between Queensberry and Elgin Streets had Italian proprietors [….]. The 1960 Melbourne directory lists 47 Italian shops in the same area, including nine espresso bars, three hairdressers, three butchers, two electrical goods retailers, two photographers, two estate agents, a chemist, a florist, a motor mechanic, a large emporium, and even an Italian hotel proprietor. Elsewhere in the Carlton area, an Italian priest, Italian doctors and solicitors, and a multitude of Italian tradesmen completed what is for many Melbourne's Italians a home away form home. For by the middle of 1960 at least one-quarter of Carlton's population was of Italian origin'.[5]

Until 1971, the Italian-born population of North Carlton was 28.5%. Today, this percentage has dropped to 4%. From the end of the 1960s, Carlton Italians moved to the outer suburbs where they built spacious houses on larger blocks. Nonetheless,

the sense of community and village life created by Carlton's Italian community is still evident to both visitors and residents of Carlton.[6]

ARCHITECTURE:
THE CHANGES MADE BY ITALIANS

From the 1950s to the 1960s, newly arrived Italian migrants generally found accommodation in one of Carlton's many boarding houses run by fellow migrants. A modest fee covered the cost of a room (usually shared with others) and a hot meal. Lack of privacy and long working hours were among the sacrifices migrants made in order to buy, in a relatively short time, their own home. Owning a home facilitated the process of *sistemazione* or settling down and enabled migrants to gain a sense of *'… place and a sense of belonging in Australia… a sense of citizenship'.*[7]

The majority of homes purchased by Italian migrants were terraces and small Victorian and Edwardian-style cottages, often run-down or in ruin, which were then renovated in what came to be known as the 'Mediterranean style'. [Fig.1&2]

'There is an Australia-wide post-World War II immigrant architectural tradition, which (while being regionally diverse and sometimes the subject of unjustified derision) is an identifiable idiom in the history of Australian architecture'.[8] Typically,

the exterior walls were plastered in green or pink, a practice which recalled domestic architecture in the land of origin. Façades were squared off [Fig.3], porches were repaved with tiles that in Italy were used for paving sunroofs [Fig.4], wrought-iron friezes were removed from the front porch [Fig.5] and picket or wrought-iron fences were replaced with rendered concrete or exposed bricks [Fig.6]. Columns and posts were used to decorate the exterior as evidence of the owner's new found status [Fig.7]. Plants and flowers were grown in pots in the front garden [Fig.8], while the backyard was reserved for the cultivation of vegetables, grapes or olive plants. There was usually a pergola and small sheds where wine was made or tomato sauce bottled.

Interiors too were transformed from the dark and brooding ornate Victorian style to light-filled, clean and minimalist. Wooden floors were replaced with tiles or linoleum, aluminium window frames replaced timber sash windows [Fig.9] and windows were protected with roller shutters (non-existent in Anglo-Australian homes during the 1950s and 1960s) [Fig.10]. Bathrooms were added and spacious kitchens created where outside verandas once stood. Corridors were painted in rose-coloured hues and floral designs and bedrooms were decorated with scenes of Italy. According to Allan Willingham, one of the first places in Carlton to undergo such a transformation was 250 Palmerston

FIG 1: Edwardian home [left] and an example of Italian migrant architecture [right]. 496-500 Rathdowne Street, North Carlton, Victoria. September 2004.

FIG 2: Victorian façade [right], and an example of the "Mediterranean" style [left]. 75 Lee Street, North Carlton, Victoria. September 2004.

FIG 3: An example of a squared off façade [right]. 635 and 637 Lygon Street, Carlton, Victoria. September 2004.

FIG 4: An example of porch paving. 195 Palmerston Street, Carlton, Victoria. September 2004.

FIG 1

FIG 2

FIG 3

FIG 4

FIG 5

FIG 8

FIG 6

FIG 7

FIG 9

Street. Its owner, Beniamino Braida, was
the founder of Federation Granolithic
Company and a migrant of Castelnuovo del
Friuli in the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia.
The renovated Villa Castelnuovo was *'a
nostalgic evocation of vernacular building
traditions of the Veneto'*.[9] Sadly, the villa
was demolished in 1989, but strolling
through the streets of Carlton, one will still
find examples of the homes of Australia's
Italians, some of them still occupied by
their migrant owners.

URBAN PLANNING: FROM HOUSING COMMISSION TO PIAZZA ITALIA
During the first two decades of the
twentieth century, the entire borough of
Carlton was subject to intense scrutiny
by the *Royal Commission of Housing of
the People in the Metropolis and in the
Populous Centres of the State* which found
that numerous buildings, especially those
in the south of Carlton, were uninhabitable.
The majority of these buildings were

FIG 10

boarding or lodging houses[10] run by
widows or families, many of Italian
origin, and most serviced newly arrived
migrants. The Commission condemned the
overcrowded and unsanitary conditions
of these dwellings and recommended
changes to the law which would oblige
owners of boarding and lodging houses to
adhere to strict sanitary regulations or risk
the withdrawal of their operating licence.
As a consequence of the Commission
findings, the 1919 Health Act came into
force. However, as the new legislation

concerned itself largely with lodging houses, the residents of boarding houses saw little improvement to conditions.[11]

In 1936, the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board's report was published by the housing reformer Oswald Barnett. Lamenting the deplorable state of its buildings and the poor, immoral and criminal population of Carlton, the report caused political outrage by citing the names of Carlton property owners, including Members of Parliament and other respected members of the community. The government was forced to act, promulgating another series of laws that had little effect.

In 1940, public housing first appeared on the urban landscape in Carlton when the newly formed Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV) constructed a small two-storey building divided into apartments, on public land. This was a precursor of what was to come in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1960, the Housing Commission earmarked 400 hectares for demolition.

'… houses declared unfit for human habitation had to be vacated immediately and demolished at owners' expense. The HCV paid small financial compensation for reclaimed homes, often amounting to only one-quarter or one-fifth of the price the owners had paid for them. For many Carlton residents dreams of ownership, realised briefly in the relatively cheap housing of the inner city, were erased along with hard-earned savings and hard-won homes'.[12]

When in 1964, 160 hectares of land situated in the centre of Carlton was included in the Carlton Redevelopment Area and designated for demolition, residents decided the time had finally come to oppose the actions of the Housing Commission and thus the Carlton Business and Property Owners Association was born. However, demolition proceeded. A quarter of the residents whose homes were destroyed were of Italian origin. *'The Italians are moving little by little out of Carlton; the Housing Commission bulldozers and the property redevelopers are taking their place'.*[13] In 1969, when the area between Lygon, Lee, Drummond and Princes Streets was earmarked for demolition, the Carlton Association came into being. In the meantime, 3,788 homes were demolished and 15 to 20 storey buildings went up in their place. Public

FIG 11: Public housing. Corner Nicholson and Elgin Streets, Carlton, Victoria. September 2004.

housing had burst onto the Carlton urban landscape [Fig.11].

The 1970s and 1980s was a period of opposition and rebirth for Carlton. The majority of migrants who arrived in the area between the two World Wars moved on and their place was taken by newly arrived migrants, artists, students and university professors (from nearby University of Melbourne). Carlton became a bohemian centre for the arts, a suburb where ethno-linguistic riches were tangible. In 1975, the Housing Commission decided not to proceed further with its planned redevelopment of Carlton, thanks in the main to the tireless opposition of the various residents' groups. By the beginning of the 1980s, the Housing Commission, instead of demolishing, began renovating and remodelling Victorian homes which were now seen as an integral part of Melbourne's architectural and historic legacy. Nonetheless, the earlier demolitions left a permanent mark on the urban and social landscape. Today in fact, it is possible to speak of two Carltons: one where the less socially affluent live in public housing, and the other where the more socially mobile live, the *middle class* who, from the 1970s onwards began the process of *gentrification* of the neighbourhood.[14] Today, Carlton is experiencing a new phase

FIG 11

of urban development which recognises the architectural and historical importance of the area and the contribution made to this by migrant communities. This is evident in the City of Melbourne's plan *Carlton: a Vision to 2010.* The Argyle Square Piazza Project [Fig. 12] is dedicated to the Italian community and its cultural legacy. The idea for an Italian-style piazza was first mooted by Carlton community leaders in 1997 when the Carlton Bowling Club, which had occupied the Argyle Square site, wound up its activities. The proposal was submitted to the City of Melbourne. The petitioners felt it was appropriate that Melbourne should be the first city in Victoria, if not Australia, to recognise the enormous contribution made by its Italian migrants to the growth and development of the state.[15] The proposal also asked for the Italian government to donate a piece of art, either a fountain or statue, as well as a plaque which would indicate to visitors places and buildings of historical and cultural importance to Italian migrants of yesteryear. In April 1998, Italian community organisations gathered to discuss the project, at the conclusion of which a letter was written to the Mayor of Melbourne asking for his support. Later that year, Council officially endorsed the proposal and the only hurdle which remained was the backing of the State government. Official support from the latter came in December 1998 during the visit to Australia of the Italian President, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. The optimism generated by the formal recognition of the proposal also raised another question: why not officially name Carlton *Little Italy,* as is the case in many North American cities? After all, it was reasoned, Melbourne had honoured her Chinese migrants with the official naming of *Chinatown* in 1984.

After a period of inactivity, the project is again centre-stage. Three principal objectives have been identified: the creation of a lively public space which mirrors the piazzas of Italy, the creation of a new urban space which highlights the uniqueness of Carlton, and the creation of a space which celebrates the unique contribution made by Italian migrants to Melbourne's cultural diversity. In February 2004, the city council of Milan, Melbourne's sister city, assigned a team of architects to look into the project and donated a bench made of Candoglia marble, the same stone used in the construction of the Milan Duomo. The proposal by the Milanese team envisaged a piazza which would perform an essential role in the lives of Carlton residents. They felt it should

FIG 12: Piazza Italia today. Carlton, Victoria. July 2006.

FIG 12

encourage people to take a *passeggiata,* it should be a meeting place where ideas are exchanged, where the Italian community hosts celebrations and ultimately, it should be a manifestation of Melbourne's cultural diversity. The design includes a colonnade, fountain, and tiered steps. In the centre of the piazza, a large pavement covered in swirling arabesque patterns—like those of a Persian carpet—would symbolise a wish for peace and prosperity for newly arrived migrants.[16] [Ed: A much more modest version of an Italian piazza was officially opened to the public on 29 January, 2006. It features Italian porphyry stone paving and a giant solar clock].

SYMBOLS OF ITALIAN CARLTON

If it is true that Carlton, and in particular the much celebrated Lygon Street, has lost a lot of the Italian character that made it so unique in the period immediately after World War II, it is also true that signs of Italian culture and tradition are still evident in the domestic and commercial architecture of Carlton and these constitute a strong focal point for tourists:

'Bartolini, a lecturer in Italian studies at Sydney University, rejects as snobbish the complaints that some Italian shopping zones are not authentic and are examples of façade-ism. 'It is never going to be a perfect little piece of Italy,' he says. 'It's always going to be a translation, an in-between place—just like Australia'.[17]

I would like to invite readers to take a *passeggiata* around Italian Carlton, using this article and its accompanying photographs as a guide. The *passeggiata* was a popular pastime among Carlton's Italians:

… during those horrible, gloomy English [Anglo-Australian] Sundays (everything was closed including the cinemas and dance

halls) … they [the Italians] introduced the "walks". Dressed to the nines, dapper and even walking arm-in-arm, their presence unsettled the poor passing Australian. From Marino E., 1999, 'Nella Lygon Street degli Anni 50', Il Globo, Melbourne, 8 November.

The photographs included in this article were taken by the author in September 2004.

NOTES

1 Spagnolo, G 1992, 'Incontrarsi a Carlton', *Messaggero di Sant'Antonio,* Basilica di Sant'Antonio, Padua, December, p. 32.

2 Chambers, D & Mayne, A 2004, 'An ill-defined suburb: colonial times', in Yule, P, (ed.), *Carlton: a history,* Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 13.

3 Sagazio, C 2004, 'A lasting impact: the Italians', in Yule P, p. 75.

4 ibid., p. 73.

5 ibid., p. 85.

6 This strong sense of community was also due in part to the presence of Jewish migrants and to Victorian housing, which was characterised by buildings with a shared main wall.

7 op. cit., p. 90.

8 Willingham, A 2004, 'Immigrant transformations: the Mediterranean idiom', in Yule, p. 473.

9 ibid., p. 477.

10 Boarding houses were dwellings in which meals were provided and boarders would stay for prolonged periods. Lodgings serviced people in transit and meals were not included.

11 O'Hanlon, S 2004, 'From rooming houses to share houses: tenants', in Yule, p. 111.

12 Mayne, A & Zygmuntowicz, K2004, 'Changing fortunes: post-war Carlton', in Yule, p. 47.

13 ibid.

14 ibid., p. 49.

15 Furletti, C 2000, 'The quest for Piazza Italia in Little Italy', *The Issue,* Melbourne, no. 3. p. 66-70.

16 Gomersall Hubbard, G 2004, 'Consultazioni per Piazza Italia', *Il Globo,* Melbourne, 24 April, p. 31.

17 Dale, D 2002, 'Little Italys bring Australians to life', *The Age,* Melbourne, 1 April, viewed 22 October 2004, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/03/31/1017206169464.html>.

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