

Architecture Recruitment Specialist

bbt

beresford blake thomas
global reach · local focus

As a leading global recruitment consultancy we know that our success has been as a result of understanding each market on a local level. Our consultants provide specialised architectural recruitment services across a range of sectors:

• Architecture • Interior Design • Landscape Architecture • Urban Design •

To find out more about the local architectural market and how we can help you, talk to the specialists:

Andrew Thompson - Permanent Placements - 0252 2152 - athompson@bbtltd.com

Jason Downes - Contract Placements - 0252 2150 - jdownes@bbtltd.com

hmaBlaze (0748)

22

ARCHITECT
VICTORIA
AUTUMN 2005

CONTRIBUTOR

HERITAGE OVERLOOKED Simon Reeves

*Simon Reeves is senior architectural historian
at Heritage Alliance.*

A misconception persists that a heritage study is a mathematical closed set into which no further correspondence need be entered. This, apparently, springs from the ingenuous notion that consultants are objective creatures that will necessarily identify every site of cultural significance. Yet even if one sets aside the biases and limitations of individuals, it remains that cultural significance itself is hardly stable, being subject to capricious shifts in tastes and perceptions, and the virulence of historiography spreading spreads into unexplored territory. Consequently, many potentially significant places are too easily overlooked in the identification and assessment stages, and even when studies are reviewed. By far the most vulnerable - and thus in special need of statutory protection - are those places that exist outside the canon of mainstream architectural taste or conventional history. The ensuing discussion attempts to lift the lid on some of these places, grouped into the obviously interesting sites whose significance is not acknowledged, and, more insidiously, the apparently unremarkable sites whose significance is not actually apparent, or even documented.

Until quite recently, the places most unabashedly neglected in heritage studies were those of post-war origin. Over the past decade, some (but by no means enough) valuable work has been done to redress this imbalance, including the completion of typological studies (modern churches, service stations, neon signs, et al), theses (modern housing) and, particularly, glossy publications on mid-century architects. Hagiolatry, however, is the inevitable side-effect, with significance only ascribed to the lucky buildings designed by a monographed few. There is a

substantial but largely unacknowledged body of work by talented architects who, for diverse reasons, remain omitted from the canon. While fine research has been undertaken on some of these fringe groups, namely pioneer women architects (q.v. Dr Julie Willis), Italian designers (q.v. Celestina Sagazio) and Jewish emigre modernists (q.v. Harriet Edquist et al), the findings of these studies have yet to be adequately reflected in the heritage studies themselves.

But this barely scratches the surface. Amongst the ignored and largely unrecorded mid-century architects are those who often worked outside conventional architectural taste. Into this group we place the striking work of serial Featurists like Graeme Lumsden, Bernard Evans, and Theo Berman, so evocative of the playful and optimistic era. St Kilda Road and Queen Street, once the showroom streetscapes for this confident commercial vernacular, have now been almost entirely pillaged of their mid-century frippery. Just as architects of the 1930s sliced the balustraded parapets from Victorian buildings and added slick Modern facades, we now have the reverse in St Kilda Road, with pediments and pilasters being thoughtlessly applied to Melbourne's most evocative Featurism. With the recent and unheralded demolition of Theodore Berman's fine Dairy Industries House at No 576, little now remains in St Kilda Road beyond a cream brick and concrete-grilled office block at No 568, which has never been picked up in a heritage study. Even the finest (and quite possibly the only) surviving example in central Melbourne, Bernard Evans' Royal Assurance House, on the corner of Bourke and Swanston, remains firmly unacknowledged on the planning scheme.



If Featurists can be thought of as working slightly outside the canon of conventional modernism, there exists another group of architects who worked in another part of the forest altogether – designers such as Ermin Smrekar, the so-called ‘King of Kitsch’, whose jaw-dropping and deliberately atasteful caprices are now all too frequently candidates for demolition or remodelling. Witness the recent demolition of Smrekar’s celebrated but unlisted San Giorgio Restaurant in Cardigan Street, Carlton, described by the architect himself (to this author) as perhaps

his favourite building. Smrekar’s finest and most accessible work, that extraordinarily Lapidusque confection on Flemington Road known as the Old Melbourne Hotel, has never been flagged in any heritage study and remains a prime target for unsympathetic redevelopment.

Any concern that the present writer is merely an apologist for low culture (although he certainly is that) can be dispelled by citing a number of important but forgotten first-string designers whose works have also slipped through the cracks. Chief amongst them are those well-



HERITAGE OVERLOOKED

CONTRIBUTOR

ARCHITECT
VICTORIA
AUTUMN 2005

23

known interstate architects who made occasional forays into Victoria, yet their work here remains unrecorded and consequently unlisted. Examples might include such gems as a house in East Kew designed by Sulman medallists Allen & Jack, a projection booth at a Wantirna drive-in cinema designed by noted Prairie Scholar Peter Muller, and a bold Modernist factory at Essendon designed by Arthur Baldwinson – potentially of state significance as the only known Victorian work of a former employee of Maxwell Fry and Walter Gropius.

Lifting the lid on an apocrypha of unsung mid-century designers also reveals a cache of underrated (and, indeed, under-researched) non-architects: landscape designers like Emily Gibson, Grace Fraser and John Stevens, architectural artists such as Ian Bow and Wesley Penberthy, and engineers such as Will Grassick, Emery Balint and Garnet Price. The work of these last named, no matter how visually striking, has often been ignored in the past simply because their designers lacked formal architectural qualifications. The lunacy of this is underscored when one wryly recalls that Balint’s Dellbridge House in Eaglemont had actually been dismissed as insignificant by a heritage consultant, and so excluded from the local heritage study, prior to its addition to the Victorian Heritage Register.

More ephemeral amongst our catalogue of overlooked heritage is the increasingly rare detritus of mid-century commercial culture: signage of neon or moulded plastic and the painted adverts on shopfront windows, fasciae and billboards. While neon signs were subject to a desktop typological study in the late 1990s, far more

research is required to identify and protect the relatively few remaining examples; only a handful of celebrated examples in Richmond are currently protected, while others, like the astonishing sub-google signage at the Essendon bowling alley (possibly the finest example in Victoria), are threatened as we speak. Such things tend to quietly disappear amidst commercial pressures: viz the recent loss of two of the city’s last remaining vestiges of mid-century retail culture – the Recorded Music Salon in Collins Street and the TW Sands kerosene lamp store in Elizabeth Street – which gave way to apparently badly-needed convenience-style outlets, their original painted signage irresponsibly scraped from the windows. This not only underscore the intrinsic fragility of the type, but also earmarks other survivors as prime candidates for heritage protection: the City Hatters store in Flinders Street, Ekselman’s jewellers in Elizabeth Street, or the sole remaining outlet of the FINA service station franchise, eking out its forlorn existence in Camberwell Road.

At the local level, there are those once-ubiquitous but now largely extinct corner milk bars, some of which still remarkably retain neon or plastic signage (Sennit’s ice cream, anyone?) or painted inscriptions of long-defunct brand names, all undeniably of aesthetic, historical and social significance for their wistful and evocative qualities, like the visual equivalent of a half-remembered Sandy Stone monologue. Already rapidly disappearing, future casualties might include the 1930s-style cartoon cat on the side of the Beehive Building in Elizabeth Street (partly overpainted as recently as last year), the incredible (and even more incredibly intact) dingbat-



boomerang signage over the Excelsior Cafe in Doncaster, and a newsagency in Heathmont with a fascia that still advertises the Listener-In radio magazine, half a century after it ceased publication. These elements are rarely, if ever, picked up in heritage studies, although the recent inclusion of a life-size fibreglass shark, perched atop a Niddrie fish and chippery, provides a glimmer of hope.

Musing on the fibreglass flake (one of seventy, apparently, made by a Greek boatmaker in the late 1960s, working from his home at St Albans)

also brings to mind the largely overlooked built heritage of post-war European migration. While at least one surviving migrant hostel has been identified in a municipal heritage study, little serious effort has otherwise been made to record and protect other evidence of migrant presence in Victoria. The unmistakable architecture parlante of the Mediterranean emigre – inner-city terraces remodelled with wrought iron, slate and terrazzo – were recently lauded by Allan Willingham in an anthology of Carltonia although, as Willingham himself noted, the best examples have long



disappeared, often fallen victim to gentrified 'restoration' to their original nineteenth-century glory. As recently as 1989, a textbook example in Palmerston Street, the mind-boggling Casa Castelnovo, was razed after being deemed to be of 'dubious architectural merit' by the (then) AAT. The shop of Giovanni "Johnny the Tailor" Briglia at 198 Elgin Street was included in a heritage review of inner city buildings in the late 1990s, but no individual overlay was applied, and some of the shop's distinctive signage has consequently been removed. Similar fates await the terrazzo'd and balustraded post-war villas built by emigre families in the outer suburbs. While their significance has been championed by many, including Allan Willingham and Celestina Sagazio of the National Trust, no study has yet been attempted and few, if any, examples are currently protected on planning schemes. A fine example in East Keilor, recently identified in the City of Moonee Valley gap heritage study, was designed for the Mirabella (lighting) family in 1966, but its obvious aesthetic and historical merit soon accrued an additional layer of architectural interest when it turned out to be perhaps the earliest known work of that deuterocanonical designer Ermin Smrekar.

So far, all of our overlooked heritage places have at least been somehow distinctive, and thus, in theory, readily identifiable by conventional means. Far more insidious, however, is our second strain: the apparently ordinary places that harbour extraordinary connotations, those simple houses, shops, hotels, warehouses, factories or even streets and alleyways that retain associations with what might be referred to as alternative history.

Perhaps the most accessible of these are

places connected with brutal murders and notorious underworld figures, which evoke a not entirely inexplicable fascination. Those who argue that such places cannot be of cultural significance need only look to Los Angeles, where thanatophilic pilgrimage is a lucrative industry via the Grave Line Tours and guidebooks like Ken Schlessler's morbid but undeniably fascinating *This is Hollywood: An Unusual Movie Land Guide*. A comparable walking tour in central Melbourne includes sites connected with such near-folkloric twentieth century crimes as the Pyjama Girl Murder, the Brownout Strangler and the Gun Alley murder of Alma Tirtschke – yet none of these places have been identified in heritage studies. Similar sites dot the suburbs, some even with an international resonance: an unremarkable Victorian cottage at 57 Andrew Street, Windsor, unlisted as the site where English visitor Frederick Deeming, a Jack the Ripper suspect, murdered a woman and buried her body under the fireplace in 1890. Or, more recently, an equally innocuous house at 52 Hibiscus Road, Blackburn North, where train robber Ronnie Biggs and his wife resided pseudonymously for a few years in the late 1960s.

It needs to be recognised that such places are not merely of interest to the jaded tourist or the morbid pop culturalist, but also to multidisciplinary historians and, often, to a local community for whom they can take on the embroidered qualities of local legend. This was vividly demonstrated to this author at a recent public consultation forum in conjunction with the Elwood heritage review, where some ordinary houses associated with gangster 'Squizzy' Taylor were identified by the floor. No eyebrows were raised, moreover, when

the consultants produced a draft citation for a bluestone laneway off Addison Street, deemed to be of local importance as the site where Molly Dean was brutally murdered in 1930, one of Melbourne's most sensational (and still unsolved) crimes of the inter-war period.

This also illustrates the role of oral history, legend, hearsay and scurrilous gossip in the identification of alternative heritage places. Every community has unrecorded stories linked to specific places – not only the murder site or crime scene, but also the folklore of the haunted

house or the misunderstood recluse – which are of considerable cultural significance at a local level. Such places, however, are often identified in heritage studies only for their conventional architectural or historical significance, completely overlooking the social value of what might be termed the suburban myth. One need only look to Tullaree, the flooded Gippsland homestead where Margaret Clement, the so-called 'Lady of the Swamp', lived in until her mysterious disappearance, or to Mayfield in Mordialloc, mansion home of the "Mad Count", Eduoard

HERITAGE OVERLOOKED

CONTRIBUTOR

ARCHITECT
VICTORIA
AUTUMN 2005

25

Fonceca, whose odd exploits are still fondly recalled by the now-elderly local children of the 1920s and '30s.

Lifting the lid on this fragile notion of undocumented heritage reveals apparently ordinary buildings and sites that are of especial significance to minorities and subcultures. Little attention has been devoted, for example, to places associated with the Beatnik culture of the 1950s. Even the two principal survivors – the Arab Cafe in Lorne and Pellegrini's in Bourke Street – have not yet been subject to individual heritage overlays, and virtually no attempt has been made to document the sites of other important Bohemian haunts (viz Gibbie's Coffee Lounge, Cafe Caprice, the Prompt Corner, et al) that, while so vividly evoked in the autobiographies of Melbourne's mid-century literati, today remain unrecorded in the city streetscape. Published memoirs such as these represent an invaluable but mostly untapped source for the identification of fringe heritage places. In this way, an unremarkable shop at 48 Faraday Street, Carlton, for example, can be happily revealed as the site where the undergraduate Barry Humphries played a series of Dadaist practical jokes on the hapless proprietor, Mr Malouf, in the early 1950s. Not necessarily of earth-shattering heritage significance in its own right, but an additional layer of history to a place, hitherto unrecorded.

Really, each of the threads thus discussed deserve far more extensive research and, indeed an article of their own. There are literally countless other examples of overlooked heritage which time and space preclude from further mention. One could go on for hours: the ubiquitous

but unrecognised and rapidly disappearing architecture of popular culture such as motels and bowling alleys (both subject to typological studies commenced, but not yet completed, by the present author), drive-in cinemas and banks (viz a rare survivor at 91 Maroondah Highway, Ringwood), prototype project housing, defunct programmatic fast food restaurants (e.g. one of the last remaining Olley's Trolley outlets, with mansard roof and stained glass dormers, recently razed in Essendon), theme parks and tourist attractions (Caribbean Gardens, or what little remains of Wobbie's World), the ever-threatened Nissan and Quonset huts (with another three surviving examples razed in the last year alone), film and TV locations, and places connected with popular music (an ordinary church hall in Carlton, site of the first Skyhooks gig in 1973). If nothing else, it is hoped that the foregoing exercise in shameless name- and place-dropping will provoke interest, prick consciences and promote a more expansive and lateral approach to research, identification and assessment in the hope that we can say to so many of these Cinderellas of Heritage:

"You shall go to the ball...."

