Melbourne, Australia: The Struggle for Identity

When somebody thinks about Rome, they automatically can picture what the city looks like: Roman architecture, columns, domes, etc. Same is true with Paris; the first images somebody would picture would be the Eiffel Tower, Arc Triomphe, etc. These cities are recognizable to people because of their success in identifying themselves as a world city, primarily through its consistency in architecture. Melbourne, Australia is also getting to this point where people are able to identify the city, but it has not always been this way. This large Victorian city has gone through many key cultural shifts throughout its history dating back to when the settlement was first discovered in the 19th century. Since these cultural shifts have occurred, Melbourne has struggled in its efforts to give itself an identity as a world city. After many different efforts in this definition of identification, the city has finally been able to give itself an identity through its role as an active world leader in sustainable design.

Melbourne’s struggle for identity all started during the process of becoming a permanent settlement. At the time, “the area around Port Phillip was the home of the Kulin nation, an alliance of several language groups of Indigenous Australians, whose ancestors had lived in the area for approximately 30,000 years” (Only Melbourne). Up until the early 19th century, the Aboriginal colonies lived peacefully using the abundant resources in the area including fishing, hunting and gathering. By the 1830’s, British and French adventurers were exploring the lands of Australia in order to create new settlements under their represented country. One of these adventurers, John Batman, ventured over to the area known as Melbourne and decided that he
wanted to create a settlement called Batmania. Believing that the Aboriginal settlers owned the land, Batman signed a treaty with the settlers (Image 1). In exchange for the land that he bought, “he gave the eight chiefs whose marks he acquired on the treaty, a quantity of blankets, knives, tomahawks, scissors, looking-glasses, flour, handkerchiefs and shirts” (Batman’s Treaty of Melbourne). The Aborigines didn’t realize that they have “sold” their land to Batman though because there were no interpreters to help bridge the communication gap between Batman and the settlers. The Aboriginal settlers thought that a gift exchange ceremony was taking place granting Batman temporary use of the land rather than a treaty signing giving up their land completely. The Kulins would have never agreed to this if they would have known what was really going on. This caused starting conflicts between the two groups. At the same time, Great Britain didn’t agree with this purchasing of land either. “Under British law, the treaty was legally invalid as the land belonged to the Crown, not to the [Kulin nation], and they had no more right to sell the land than Batman had to buy it” (Batman’s Treaty of Melbourne). Batman’s attempt at creating a new settlement completely failed as Britain evoked the treaty six months later and gained back control over the land. This failed attempt to begin an independent colony sparked the start of the efforts in the future that were made to give Melbourne a real identity.

Melbourne’s search for identity continued when the settlement was finally created and immigrants were moving into this newly found land. One of these immigrants was Melbourne’s first architect, Samuel Jackson. He envisioned and drew the ideal town of Melbourne, consisting of similar architecture that would spread throughout the town (Image 2 and 3). Sadly, this vision did not go through, resulting in the trend of inconsistent architecture throughout the city. The primary reason this happened is because the immigrants who were settling in Melbourne had different cultural backgrounds, meaning that they all had different building styles that used
different materials that were imported from their homelands. When these immigrants started to build different settlements to live in, they were not permanent and/or were not built with the same materials as one another. If you were to walk down the street when this was happening, you would be able to see the vast range of different settlements. By this time, people were able to recognize who was living where based on the materials and building styles of each settlement.

“Some houses were built of adobe (Spanish) or clay lump (English) construction which consisted of sun-dried mud bricks mixed with chopped straw” (Building a City). Even though there were different materials used throughout these settlements, the settlers used similar construction methods to build their new settlements. “In the greater Melbourne area and in the country, variations of wattle and daub or half-timbered construction can still be found” (Building a City). Even with this similarity of construction, the actual housing types being built still gave Melbourne an undefined image. Not only were the various immigrants bringing back different materials from their homeland; they were also bringing back different housing constructions as well. For example, “John Pascoe Fawkner brought the frame of his six-roomed house from George Twon to Melbourne in 1836 and the following year Thomas Napier, a carpenter from Scotland, brought his from Hobart. Dr. Godfrey Howitt erected a house brought from England on the corner of Spring and Collins Streets in 1839” (Building a City). Since these housing types came from different parts of the world, they each had their own unique characteristics that might have looked good in their own context. These different styles of housing in Melbourne created an unbalanced system of architecture for the colony, resulting in the city’s identity not looking unified at all.

Another effort to give Melbourne an identity occurred during the 1850’s when gold was discovered in Victoria. This finding of gold led to the massive increase of immigrants coming
into the country. On a good note, it was good that gold was discovered in the area because it brought more money into the city as well as new immigrants with skills as “tradesmen, especially bricklayers and masons” (Building a City). On the other hand, this extreme change in population led to one problem: where would all of these new immigrants live? Even with the increase in wealth that the city had, they had no time to build housing with their construction techniques for this new population. To resolve this, a new planning module for housing was invented in order to get settlements built fast in order for people to have a place to live. Although this did create more housing within a reasonable time to house all of these new immigrants, architects completely lost the need to specifically design any of these new buildings. “Meaning and symbolism required little rethinking among architects,” meaning that since this new modulus was created, the role of the architect almost completely diminished with these designs (Building a City). Creativity was lost within the city since architects were not completely designing anymore, giving Melbourne a dull image. An example of one of these types of housing projects was the Royal Terrace, located off of Nicholson St. across from the Carlton Gardens (Image 4). Brick buildings similar to this were constructed everywhere within Melbourne, giving the city no eye candy to really look at when walking through the town. The city was running into a problem whereas earlier in the century the architecture had no unification at all, now going into the 1850’s and 60’s and not ending until the start of the 20th century, Melbourne ran into the opposite identity problem with all of its architecture looking way too uniform and boring.

When the start of the 20th century came, new styles of architecture were coming into Melbourne. As a result, the city was starting to hold pre-modern structures that were starting to create a name for Melbourne. Unfortunately, this effort for a unifying identity fell short due to a new problem that was happening during this time period. The city started a history of constantly
tearing down buildings and quickly rebuilding new ones based on the new styles of architecture that were becoming admired in other rising cities like New York City and Miami. This rapid building of architecture resulted in forms that were “minimal and ‘open’, finished yet never quite definite; a form that always opens to something else, to an unreachable essential, to that ‘distant’ destined to be distant, which can always be hoped for yet is never seizable and conceivable” (Poetics in Architecture). This problem occurred the most during the 1950’s and 60’s when the city of Melbourne wanted to create a “booming” area of town characterized by tall buildings since the height restrictions had just been lifted for buildings during this time period. In order to this plan to go through, the city tore down all of the existing buildings that were on the main road that ran through downtown Melbourne, Collins St. The city replaced these buildings with quick new buildings that were supposed to draw people into the city rather than Melbourne being just a place for business. Architects didn’t focus on the actual design part of these new buildings; all they had in mind was to get them up as quick as possible. An example of a building getting quickly built was the Southern Cross Hotel (Image 5). As previously stated, Melbourne saw the positive growth that was happening in Miami and the city wanted the similar growth that this newly developed city was experiencing. During the 1950’s, Morris Lapidus had defined the resort-style hotel with his designs including his famous work, the Fountainebleau. Melbourne observed the success that this hotel was having and they wanted to bring this same success within Melbourne as well. This sparked the design of the Southern Cross Hotel in 1962, which had a very similar style to the newly famous Miami resort hotel. Primarily designed to bring people across the globe into the city, the hotel included “vivid interior tiling decor, 17 second room service response time, shops and Melbourne's 1st tenpin bowling alley” (History of Melbourne). The hotel was a hit at first, but it ultimately didn’t bring the popularity that it was
expecting to get, and was torn down by the end of the century. This is just one of many examples of buildings being quickly brought up but losing public interest that the architecture was striving to get from the citizens of Melbourne. Since the architects during this time period were just trying to get buildings up as quick as they could, they lost the public interest resulting in the eventual destruction or complete remodeling of these buildings. These efforts to create an identity in Melbourne were unsuccessful due to the constant rebuilding and demolition that was taking place within the city.

“Central Melbourne was by the 1980’s becoming increasingly monofunctional” and the city still had the same goal of “changing downtown from a central business district into a central activities district” (Eco-Urbanity). In order to change the look and function of what downtown Melbourne was, the government acted again with an effort to help the city’s identity by creating and proposing the Master Plan of 1985. This “strategy plan formed the foundation for the subsequent two decades of the city’s urban renewal. …the 1985 plan presented a development framework and implementation priorities for land use, movement, built form, community services, city structure and the physical environment” (1985 Strategy Plan). The plan’s primary goal was to identify which characteristics of Melbourne were positive and which ones were negative. The government would then reinforce these positive aspects of the city and would remove the negative aspects of the city. This push for identification of the good and bad features of the city started helping resolve Melbourne’s continuing problem throughout the 20th century of constantly tearing down “old” buildings and building quick new buildings to take its place. This city plan started to give Melbourne a unifying identity for the first time in its history.

When the city was determining which parts of the city were good and which parts were bad, the government ultimately decided that “the major patterns of Melbourne’s cityscape which
give the city its distinctive identity were to be preserved” (City Edge). An example of one of the buildings that the government decided to keep was the Royal Exhibition Building (Image 6). Originally, the building was recorded as a building that was going to be eventually torn down but since the Master Plan took effect, he building was given World Heritage status in 2004. This meant that was building that would be kept due to its architectural and historical importance. The history behind the building is very important and is the key reason why it gained Heritage Status. The building was constructed in 1880 for the purpose of holding the Melbourne International Exhibition. Besides the Olympics being held in the city during the mid-1950’s, “the International Exhibition of 1880 put Melbourne on the world map as a major city” because of the one million plus people who came to the exhibition (Only Melbourne). This building is a major part of Melbourne’s history and the preservation of the building helped to start give Melbourne a distinct identity through its monumental architecture.

Once the government had started tearing down the buildings that believed had a negative effect on the city, they started the process of building new ones that would take their place. An example of this new construction during the 1980’s was the Rialto Towers (Image 7). Located on Collins St., the buildings were designed as one of the tallest office buildings in the southern hemisphere using reinforced concrete and containing a color changing glass façade. These buildings were designed to represent the new culture of the corporate world that Melbourne was trying to create as well as the ideas of bringing in a similar modern architecture within the city. This language of architecture and new definition of culture for Melbourne helped reinforce the identity that the city was starting to create for themselves.

The actions resulting from the 1985 Master Plan were still taking into effect during the 1990’s as now only certain buildings were getting tore down or restored versus how during the
rest of the 19th century when the city constantly tore down most of the old buildings within the city and replaced them with quick new buildings. A new process of restoration called facadism was attempted during this time period. Facadism is “the principle or practice of preserving the fronts of buildings that have elegant architectural designs; the construction of a modern building behind its old or original front” (dictionary.com). Melbourne used this restoration technique in order to try to meet half way between demolishing a building yet historically preserving it at the same time. An example of facadism that took place in Melbourne was the Old Commerce Building at the University of Melbourne (Image 8). The façade of the building was taken from an old bank that used to exist off of Collins St. and was used for the new building for the university campus. Even though this technique worked out well for some buildings including this example, the practice became highly discouraged during the 1990’s. A ten meter policy was written and enforced during this time period in order to stop the process of facadism from taking place. The policy called for the retention of a minimum of 10 meters of the front of the building in order to keep a consistent relationship from building to building within the context of the city. This enforcement of restoration of the faces of Melbourne’s city buildings helped create a more uniform image representing the city with buildings having similar relationships with each other versus there being dramatic changes from building to building as you look down the streets of Melbourne.

Once the 21st century started, Melbourne had finally started to create a permanent world identity as a major city. One of the ways the city established itself a dominant world city was with its active role as a member in the World Cities Climate Leadership Group. The group was founded by the mayor of London at the time, Ken Livingstone, which consisted of twenty five major cities across the earth. These cities, including Melbourne, joined this group in order to
become world leaders in sustainable design to make a difference for the planet due to the increasing effects of global warming. The members of the group believed they could make a difference in sustainability since the cities within this group contained “around 50% of the world population, consume 75% of the world’s energy, and produce 80% of its greenhouse gases” (Wikipedia). Since Melbourne plays as a major role in the world’s greenhouse gases, world’s energy and total population, the city decided to take advantage of this and to create a new and permanent identity for the city as one of the world leaders of sustainable design.

In order for the city to push itself as one of top cities that uses sustainable design, the city published the Zero Net Emissions by 2020 proposal. The program was originally written and put into action in 2002 and was updated in 2008 because “the City of Melbourne [recognized] the need to build on the success of the [Zero Net Emissions by 2020 proposal] by positioning Melbourne as a centre for leading edge design and better reflecting the current political, technological and behavioural environment surrounding climate change” (Zero Net Emissions by 2020). One of the primary goals of this plan was to decrease the use for Melbourne citizens to use cars to get from place to place. The city has been focusing on decreasing the urban sprawl that has been happening around the city by building an increase in high rise housing projects within the city, giving a new distinctiveness to the city. That way, the residents who lived in these buildings have a better possibility of not needing to use a car to go to different locations within the city.

Due to this new proposal to make the city a sustainable one, the city has given itself a new personality with its identity in terms of its architectural design. “With a new focus on complexity and material texture through elements such as exposed concrete fins, juxtaposed geometrical elements, the use of metallic chrome cladding and curtain walled glass, todays
Melbourne buildings are a more modern expression of complexity” (Walking Melbourne). The city has finally started to create a name for it by containing this style of architecture and keeping it consistent when constructing new buildings versus how the city used to shortly tear down the buildings after they had built. An example of this newly Melbourne defined architecture is the East Melbourne Library (Image 9). Designed by Garry Ormston, the building’s architecture keeps the same language of style with buildings that are being built during the same time period with this newly defined Melbourne architecture with its juxtaposition of different volumes and curtain walls. “The new facility includes a number of ground breaking ESD strategies to minimize its environmental impact during construction and over the life of the building” (East Melbourne Library and Community Centre). These new sustainable innovations include natural ventilation, glass that retains the internal temperature of the buildings, and sensory-activated light sources that only turn on when there is not enough natural light coming into the building. Similar to this example, Melbourne has been consistently building this new style of modern and sustainable architecture, giving the city a cohesive image.

Even though it took the city a while to figure out their identity, Melbourne has finally been able to call itself a unified world city with its use of modern architecture that uses green technology. Since the city has followed its emissions plan, it has gone through complete success, holding over 4 million people and having one of the lowest unemployment rates the city has seen. Luckily, the city realized that in order for the city “to be a liveable city, Melbourne must also be sustainable” (Zero Net Emissions by 2020). Melbourne, Australia would not be the city that they are today if they did not go through all the attempts throughout its history in trying to find its identity as a world city.
Works Cited


Image 1: John Batman signing treaty with Aboriginal settlers.

Image 2 and 3: Samuel Jackson’s Ideal town plan for Melbourne.
Image 4: Royal Terrace

Image 5: Southern Cross Hotel
Image 6: Royal Exhibition Building

Image 7: Rialto Towers
Image 8: Old Commerce Building: The University of Melbourne

Image 9: East Melbourne Library