

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall

20/06/03–30/08/03

Gallery Times:
Monday 10am-2pm
Tuesday-Thursday 11am-6pm
Friday 11am-6.30pm
Saturday 10am-2pm

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Proudly presented by



melbourne 1950 – 1959



**austerica/collins st/
whelan the wrecker/
highett fidelity/six o'clock
swill/bodgies/widgies/
ici house/carpet bowls/
brick veneer/tivoli/union
jack/flaming torch/
pink terrazzo/**

melbourne 1950 – 1959

Cover Image
Around town,
1959

Laurie Richards
Source: City of
Melbourne Art
and Heritage
Collection



The character of a decade is largely an artificial construction. Melbourne did not become a different city on New Year's Day 1950 or 1960. Yet there are certain characteristics undeniably associated with those years between 1950 and 1959. **Melbourne 1950-1959** explores the history of the city in this decade through photography – each photograph in this exhibition representing part of a whole textual history of Melbourne. We have selected photographs from the City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection and the State Library of Victoria's Picture Collection to represent the specificities of 1950s Melbourne, but of course they also relate to the wider histories of the decade in Australia and the rest of the world.

As Australia moved away from agriculture towards manufacturing as its main economic base, Melbourne became the most industrialised city in Australia. For many of the city's political and business leaders the move towards mass production represented progress and development, prosperity and wealth creation. The labour base for the growing manufacturing industry was bolstered by an enormous influx of immigrants from Britain and Europe, after a relaxation of immigration quotas for Southern European and Jewish people. By 1955, one million new migrants had arrived in Australia since the Second World War, a large proportion of them coming to Melbourne.

Women also moved into the workforce in steadily growing numbers throughout the 1950s, despite the ubiquitous emphasis on traditional gender roles within the family home. Their employment opportunities were largely limited to non-managerial positions: clerks, typists, shop assistants, factory workers, teachers and nurses, and their wages were set at 75 per cent of male earnings.

1953
Female Bank
Clerk at work,
State Head Office,
National Bank
of Australia,
279 Collins Street

Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State
Library of Victoria



In a relatively short time Melbourne became a much more cosmopolitan city. This was evident in the new espresso cafes, like Pellegrini's, and Il Capuccino, which both opened in 1954 and Don Camillo in 1955. A raft of others opened shortly afterwards. But some new customs were still controversial by the end of the decade. The Oriental Hotel tried putting tables and chairs on the footpath of Collins Street in 1958, but by 1960 they had been removed by the Melbourne City Council again. Although a referendum campaign to extend opening hours was run in 1956, it was rejected and the phenomenon of the six o'clock swill persisted until 1966. Temperance campaigners argued that extended opening hours were worryingly Continental and denounced the call to make Melbourne a more sophisticated metropolis for the Olympic Games.

While new immigrants moved into the inner city during the 1950s, many of the prior occupants of these areas were departing to the new suburbs ringing the centre of Melbourne. Home ownership rose from 54 per cent in 1952 to 68 per cent in 1960 and about a third of houses constructed in the new suburbs were built by their owners.

Despite the call by a group of modernist architects including Robin Boyd, Neil Clerehan and Peter MacIntyre to build houses along modern, functional and scientific lines, the majority of houses in suburbia followed a traditional bungalow style, first in fibro and weatherboard, then as the materials crisis eased, in brick veneer. Along with the new suburbs rose a steady stream of anti-suburban rhetoric and satire. Barry Humphries' character, Edna Everage, who first appeared in 1955, was scathing about Melbourne suburbia.

At the same time, a severe housing shortage in the early 1950s meant that the Housing Commission campaign to rid the city of 'slums', first begun in the 1930s, stalled temporarily. But in 1956 slum clearance demolition orders increased dramatically, and for the rest of the 1950s inner-city Victorian terraces were steadily demolished and Housing Commission walk-up flats constructed in their place. The first high-rise Commission flats began construction in South Melbourne in 1960.

1958
I.C.I. Building,
1 Nicholson
Street, East
Melbourne

Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State
Library of Victoria



The modern aesthetic that went hand in hand with the notion of 'progress' was adopted by most city leaders with gusto. The result was the construction of large scale modernist architecture around the city, like the Olympic Swimming Pool in 1956 and the Myer Music Bowl in 1957. Numerous high-rise office buildings were constructed along clean modernist lines all over the CBD, but ICI House, in 1959, was the first building in Melbourne to break the 1916 height restriction of 132 foot. While new buildings went up around the city, a number of old buildings came down. 'Whelan the Wrecker is here' became a familiar sign on nineteenth-century Melbourne buildings in the attempt to make Melbourne a modern, international and prosperous city. Losses included the many Victorian market complexes in the centre of Melbourne. The Eastern, Western and Fish markets were all demolished at the end of the decade.

The large scale spectacles held throughout the 1950s were also symbols of modernity. The fiftieth anniversary of Federation in 1951 commemorated the past in parades, re-enactments and an arts festival, but also presented a narrative of progress leading to a prosperous future. The Queen's visit in 1954, the first ever by a monarch to Australia, cemented Melbourne's bond with Britain using modern constructions of celebrity and iconography. The creation of the Moomba festival in 1955 was designed both as an arts festival and as an economic development strategy to replace the traditional 8 Hours Day March. But, in the largest spectacle of all these, the hosting of the Olympic Games in 1956, Melbourne felt that it had proved to the world, especially through the new technology of television, what a modern city it was.

Emma Willoughby

1954
Her Majesty
being received by
the Lord Mayor at
the entrance to
the Royal Ball.

Unknown
photographer
Source: City of
Melbourne Art
and Heritage
Collection



1.



7.



13.



2.



8.



14.



3.



9.



4.



10.



5.



11.



6.



12.

1. 1958
Corner of Swanston and Collins Streets,
Mark Strizic
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

2. 1954
Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip parade down Bourke Street
Unknown photographer
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

3. 1956
Interior, Johns & Waygood, Steel fabricating plant, Sandringham
Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State Library of Victoria

4. 1956
Ron Clarke entering the Melbourne Cricket Ground
Unknown photographer
Herald and Weekly Times
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

5. Around 1958
Café tables outside the Oriental Hotel, 41 Collins Street
Elton Fox
Source: State Library of Victoria

6. 1959
Around town
Laurie Richards
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

7. 1953
Cafeteria interior
Laurie Richards
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

8. 1958
Rear of Bourke Street, Eastern End
Mark Strizic
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

9. 1953
Female Bank Clerk at work, State Head Office, National Bank of Australia, 279 Collins Street
Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State Library of Victoria

10. 1958
Facade detail, 406 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne
Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State Library of Victoria

11. 1954
Her Majesty being received by the Lord Mayor at the entrance to the Royal Ball
Unknown photographer
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

12. 1958
I.C.I. Building, 1 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne
Wolfgang Sievers
Source: State Library of Victoria

13. 1959
Around town
Laurie Richards
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

14. 1959
The Western Market building, taken prior to its demolition in 1959-60
Unknown photographer
Source: City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection

Original titles have been used where known
Design – Round, Melbourne
Curator – Emma Willoughby