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One Hawaiian pack to take-away: The evolution of the Australian roadside restaurant.

In the dramatic recasting of Australia cities following the Second World War, the rapid rise of automobile ownership ushered in an entirely new urban landscape. This was a landscape dominated by buildings and signage specifically designed to be consumed at speed. New urban typologies like motels, drive-ins and shopping centres littered the nation's highways bringing with them a dizzying array of shapes, colours and forms suitable for Australia's burgeoning automobile age. Out of this development the typology with arguably the most visible and enduring legacy remains the contemporary fast food restaurant. Since the arrival of the American chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken, in 1968, with their jaunty red and white striped carnivalesque buildings, fast food chains have become ubiquitous, each with their own distinctive brand of roadside architecture.

But what led to the widespread growth of fast food restaurants in the early 1970s? Despite the significant presence of the fast food restaurant on Australia's built environment, to date it has rarely been subject to study and the precursors of the type – the pie cart, food vans and drive-in diners – are yet to be discussed in relation to the contemporary fast food restaurant. This paper then aims to document the evolution of the roadside restaurant in Australia and the wide range of buildings which were produced. This survey will encompass early food vans

including Bernie's Finger Meals caravan, a range of imported American models like McDonalds and Pizza Hut, alongside later Australian efforts like Red Rooster, Neptune's Fishbowl and Chicken Treat. It aims specifically to identify the architectural responses presented in the growth of the typology and their significance in Australia's postwar built environment.

“Just another phenomenon of modern living like singing commercials or oil slicks”

-Robin Boyd, 1971.¹

A period of extraordinary prosperity characterised by economic growth, low unemployment and developing trade relationships, the three decades which followed the end of the Second World War saw the dramatic recasting of Australia's capitals into modern, internationally focussed centres. This was a period when Australia shifted its focus from Britain to the United States, amidst what Peter J. Taylor has called the high period of America's hegemonic cycle – when “the American dream became the ‘world dream.’”² Australia's increasing involvement with American political and militaristic projects coupled with the generally increasing levels of prosperity in the wake of Australia's ‘long boom’ led to conditions which, as Philip Goad has described, saw an ‘enthusiastic embrace’ of American culture.³

The American influence on Australian society was clearly illustrated in the dizzying new sophistication evident in the central cities led by the introduction of high rise buildings, international hotels, night clubs and fine dining restaurants which Hogben and O'Callaghan describe as “manifestations of the pleasure-seeking made possible through the powerful combination of greater amounts of free time and disposable income. They celebrated the visibility of wealth and prosperity and of youth seeking the means to express itself.”⁴ A less glamorous, but equally significant shift occurred in the changing urban landscape, which Graeme Davison contends, “[The] Americanisation of the Australian city often seemed to be most vividly expressed in the changing roadside.”⁵ Led by the sharp increase in car ownership which would be the fourth highest per capita in the world by 1960, the widespread development of the road networks beginning in the 1950s enabled the spread of the Australian city around and far beyond suburban rail corridors.⁶ Davison would describe this as the new ‘Automobilised Landscape’: an urban landscape shaped “by the new tyrannies of fast food, parking meters and traffic congestion.”⁷

The spread of road networks brought with them an entirely new set of architectural typologies, specifically geared towards the motorist which *The Sydney Morning Herald* described in 1956 as an imminent ‘motor-car age’ of architecture.”⁸ The article elaborated on this suggesting, “Motels and drive-in theatres are recent importations from America, and signs would indicate that our development is likely to

take place in parallel with the American culture of the motor car.”⁹ This was indeed the case, and soon a range of building typologies originating from America and designed to specifically compliment the car appeared. Motels, drive-in theatres, shopping centres and service stations became familiar sights across Australian suburbs. But this article noted one conspicuous omission: the roadside restaurant. A common site in America from the late 1930s, the roadside restaurant was amongst the most prolific of these new types and perhaps more than others has come to epitomise the exciting new wave of building designed to specifically engage the automobilised landscape, a central element of what Robin Boyd would describe as the “neon-lit, candy-coloured, flashing fun life.”¹⁰ Exemplars of the type like the early Stanley Meston designed McDonalds or the gleaming White Castle restaurants soon became representative of the changing American landscape; however, comparative examples did not arrive in Australia until the very late 1960s. But despite their delayed entry into Australia, the roadside restaurant and its evolution into the current fast food outlet stands today as the most successful and enduring example of roadside architecture. While suburban shopping centres are failing, and motels, drive-in theatres and even service stations are struggling to survive, fast food restaurants remain wildly popular.

Echoing the typologies development, scholarship surrounding the roadside or fast food restaurant in Australia remains a conspicuous omission. In the wake of Graeme Davison’s landmark *Car Wars* many of these urban types have been identified as sites of significant architectural merit. Buildings like the Black Dolphin Motel, Chadstone Shopping Centre and the drive-in theatres of Peter Muller, along with the roadside contributions of well-known architects like Enrico Taglietti, Alex Jelinek and Robin Boyd and have since entered the historiographical canon.¹¹ Yet, despite the success of the type, the roadside restaurant and its multiple incarnations are still to be subject to similar studies.

The literature that deals with the cultural impact and design of these restaurants is almost non-existent and exists within local heritage studies, two undergraduate theses and a handful of recent conference papers and a journal article which explore the relationship between fast food and planning.¹² In a paper that outlines the planning history of fast food restaurants, Elizabeth Taylor and David Nichols note the type’s essentially anonymous character and almost overwhelming ubiquitousness,

describing them as “hiding in plain sight, as familiar and therefore as neutral as traffic lights of petrol stations.”¹³ This assessment, along with the temporary nature of their predecessors like the hamburger caravan, makes keen insights into their lack of recognition within a broader historical narrative and the difficulties in identifying these restaurants as sites of cultural significance.

Building from the work of Taylor and Nichols, this paper then seeks to extend the knowledge of the roadside restaurant in Australia attempting to both sketch out the details of a general history and taking up American scholar Philip Langdon’s argument that the roadside restaurant as a type “is a design phenomenon worth examining.”¹⁴

Early Roadside Experiments

By the early 1960s a well-developed casual dining scene in America had emerged around new road networks populated by roadside food stalls, diners and drive-in restaurants. Australia, in comparison, was much slower to develop and roadside food options were almost non-existent. Instead, the Australian dining landscape was more typically centred on European coffee houses, formal dining rooms, pubs and an increasing array of novelty restaurants. There were neighbourhood take-away restaurants but there were almost always located within an existing shopping strip, serving either fish and chips or Chinese food.

Casual dining options existed in Australia from the interwar period but unlike the sophisticated organisation seen in the USA these were much more ad-hoc and transient in effect. The first of the casual roadside dining options were a range of caravans, carts and street vendors that became common in Australia’s capitals by the 1940s. Two of the more well-known include Bernie’s Finger meals supper caravan established in Perth in 1940, and Harry’s café de wheels, a popular Sydney fixture established 1938.¹⁵ These carts were particularly successful with a young crowd enthused by a taste for a new American cuisine most likely developed following alliances formed during the First World War.¹⁶ Beginning as moveable vans, these carts soon became permanently parked and a range of makeshift tables and chairs were fashioned in their vicinity offering a casual al fresco dining

experience. These paved the way for a range of food trucks offering donuts, pluto-pups and hamburgers appearing at markets, sporting events and the roadside. Many of these evolved into permanent restaurants like the Van Eileen 'eats' caravan located on Cottesloe beach. Beginning in 1946 as a plywood caravan, by 1967 it had been replaced by a dynamic structure complete with angular canopy, neon lights and bold signage.¹⁷

Following these informal options, there was a brief appearance of roadside drive-in diners from the early 1960s. Distinct from both the early pie carts and caravans and later standalone, self-service take-away stores, 'drive-in' restaurants were a concept popularised in 1950s America through chains like Pig Stands and Dog'n'Suds.¹⁸ These restaurants offered limited, if any, dine-in options, rather they relied on a carhop service where servers would take and deliver orders out to the customers' car parked within an expansive parking area. Often designed in an overt 'Googie' style the restaurants relied on eye-catching design and exaggerated canopies to attract diners. Notable examples include Rob's Drive-In Melbourne; the Cobb and Co in Tempe, NSW designed by Bruce Rickard in 1963 with its zig-zag roof and brightly lit street sign; and the Burger King chain, which originated in Adelaide in 1962. Designed by architect Ian Campbell, the Australian Burger King drive-in restaurants featured roller skate wearing waitresses who served diners parked under enormous red and yellow striped canopies.¹⁹ While these provided an exciting and unusual eating experience they remained on the edges of dining culture. Dine-In restaurants never amounted to a sustained or wide spread tradition and instead eked out an existence on suburban fringes until they were all but forgotten with the arrival in the late 1960s of the international fast food chains.

The Chains Arrive

While Burger King experienced success, expanding to 17 locations across South and Western Australia, the dramatic styling of the drive-in restaurant and the hamburger caravan failed to make an impact upon the Australian dining scene and they remain a retro curio of Australia's embrace of American pop culture. It was not until the arrival of those fine-tuned, internationally franchised versions of major American chains, which had developed from individual roadside stalls to

multinational corporations, that enabled the embrace of roadside dining in Australia, capitalising on the enormous growth of the nation's highways, and continuously expanding car ownership. These chains arrived with sophisticated marketing campaigns, identifiable branding and most importantly for their effect on Australia's urban landscape: their own complete architectural language. The hyperactive Google architecture of the mid 1960s Australian drive-in was surpassed by a sophisticated, tightly arranged architectural ensemble of chain restaurants.

Bringing with them an unfamiliar style of food, service and marketing, these odd looking stand-alone restaurants were soon a familiar sight on the nation's highways. Following the arrival in 1968 in Sydney of the first American chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken, this fast food restaurant experienced extraordinary growth. By 1970, marked by a visit to Australia by the Colonel himself, KFC had already opened 38 stores at the rate of 1 per week.²⁰ KFC was followed by Pizza Hut, opening a store in Belfield, NSW in 1970; McDonalds in Yagoona, NSW in 1971; Burger King renamed Hungry Jack's, opened in Innaloo, Western Australia in 1971, along with a slew of other chains which quickly failed.

The Architecture of the Roadside

The success of the new fast food restaurant, compared with the previous roadside variants, can be partly attributed to the development of the architectural type over a number of decades that were carefully calibrated for the new American landscape. Responding directly to the economic and cultural advances in the postwar period the result was a series of standardised instantly recognisable buildings, offset with bold graphic identities. It is important at this point to briefly outline the development of the modern fast food restaurant.

The most well-known example of the first wave of American fast food restaurant chains, those which took the casual, utilitarian roadside stall and commodified it, was McDonalds with their now iconic 1953 candy-striped building design and the Golden Arches 'M' logo. Designed in collaboration between Richard and Maurice McDonald and architect Stanley Meston, the new McDonalds became the archetypal roadside chain restaurant design.²¹ With its neon signs, bold colour scheme and angular

design aimed at passing motorists, the McDonalds building epitomised the first wave of American fast food culture.

The architecture of American roadside diners continued in this vein until the mid-1960s, when a change in consumer tastes led to what Philip Langdon has called 'The Browning of America', the result of a fast food restaurant backlash "whose flamboyant 1950s-style designs were running up against increasing community resistance...[and] began yielding to public pressure for a less brash appearance."²² This backlash came during a period of social reform and newfound affluence in America, which prompted a shift towards more family, focussed, comfortable, dine-in restaurants.²³ Debuting in 1969, the new standardised McDonald's restaurant designed by Donald E. Miller and initiated by Ray Kroc perfectly illustrates the 'browning' effect. The new restaurants were low slung brown brick buildings complete with extensive indoor dining areas and McDonald's new signature: a double mansard roof clad in slate or brown ceramic tiles. The browning of American fast food restaurants in the late 1960s was widespread and most chains underwent similar rebranding exercises parallel to the taste making waves of McDonalds. This was the new era of American fast-food. The brash teenage hangouts were gone – replaced by dine-in family restaurants with significant corporate clout, capital backing and marketing nous honed over several decades. Significantly it was these nostalgic, and 'browened' versions of the fast food chains that were brought to Australia, resulting in a curious mix of cultural values and nationalist imagery severed from its original context.

The arrival of these stand alone restaurants located in prominent positions along the country's highways stood in stark contrast to the traditional, low-key Australian take-away restaurants situated within larger shopping strips. In a rare occurrence of American architecture wholly transplanted to Australia, all the major chains imported their standardised building designs, which were then integral to their brands international recognition. KFC brought over their current building type designed in 1963 by Morris Hall and Peter Norris in Atlanta. Pizza Hut used the standard ranch house building type developed by architect Richard D. Burke in Wichita, Kansas in 1964. Besides these well-known chains there were a range of now-forgotten attempts at entering the Australian market, including Beef Ranch, Burger Chef and Church's Fried Chicken.²⁴ One of the key proponents of the nostalgic American fast

food movement, Red Barn, only managed to accumulate seven stores in Victoria before being bought out and closed in 1972, but it provided one of the more memorable examples – a cartoonish version of an American barn coloured bright red, complete with ‘western’ saloon styling.²⁵ A success in America, the image of wild west Red barns marooned along the highway made an uneasy but lasting impression in Australia – Robin Boyd described them as “pretty weak...unimaginative, nostalgic, foreign, gaudy and unamusing.”²⁶

Australian Chains

In response to this American invasion a number of Australian fast food chains entered the market hoping to claim part of this growing industry. While many of these aspired to rival the American examples, in reality they were often little more than franchised versions of traditional take-away restaurants with none of the marketing, branding, or service efficiency found in the American chains. An example was Tiffany’s which by 1972 had 10 stores across Sydney serving a wide range of dishes in a bain marie set up, including “curried prawns and curried chicken through to sweet and sour pork, Bengal bread, and chicken Mexicana.”²⁷

The first Australian standalone fast food restaurants explored a range of architectural types. One of the earliest, reported in *The Age* as the first local fast food chain in Victoria, was Golden Chick Carry-Out established in 1968 primarily as a competitor for Kentucky Fried Chicken which was yet to arrive in Victoria.²⁸ Founded by local entrepreneur and restaurateur Peter Bancroft it took an approach more in line with the earlier drive-in restaurants.²⁹ Golden Chick’s restaurants were to be extravagant affairs, located on lots no less than 10,000 square feet which would include extensive parking, indoor and outdoor dining space and a fully equipped children’s play area. While the architect is unknown, the building presents an orthodox attempt at roadside architecture, utilising a series of shallow barrel vaults over an open glazed area, offset by a parapet wall emblazoned with the logo and restaurant name. Another curious example was the Ollie’s Trolley franchise started in 1967 by Peter Copulos. With 21 mostly regional Victorian locations, by 1985 it was an early success, but the architecture was firmly in the mould of the ‘browned’ American chains, with oversize mansard brown tile roofs, clinker brick walls and arched dormer

windows.³⁰ Both of these present interesting attempts at entering the market, but both skirted a line between traditional family dining rooms and fast food restaurants.

But there were a series of restaurant chains which opened up between 1968 and 1974 that together present a relatively cohesive and recognisable attempt to create a local fast food chain culture, one that could mount a challenge to the international examples. These were small, often take-away only stores which relied more on colourful signage and graphics rather than exaggerated architectural forms, and utilised streamline kitchen and service workflows to deliver an increasingly efficient and standardised customer experience. Given the arrival of the nostalgic, homely American themed restaurants which were brought over by the major chains, it makes sense that many of the first Australian fast food outlets established a different approach, favouring designs more in line with the first wave of American fast food restaurants from 2 decades prior. The most notable example was Neptune's Fishbowl franchise designed by Robin Boyd. Developed by long term Boyd clients Peter Shelmerdine and Richard Frank in 1970, the Fishbowl fish and chips shop was memorable for the pop architecture kiosk with an eye catching blue sphere perched atop a faceted round base, if anything, recalling the original McDonald's restaurant in San Bernardino before the Meston redesign. Woody's Hamburgers, another Melbourne example debuting in 1970 took a similar approach.³¹ Designed by John Bish, a former senior designer at progressive Western Australian practice Hawkins and Sands, Woody's was a compact, rounded white box offset with splashes of fashionable orange and brown elements and a psychedelic logo and interior. Red Rooster, the most successful of the Australian fast food chains perfected this type. Designed by Western Australian architect Graham Harler and first opened in the Perth suburb of Kelmscott in 1972, the first Red Rooster's were crisp white boxes with minimal decoration instead relying on the signage and brightly backlit menu inside to draw passing customers to the store. Red Bull, the accompanying hamburger branch of Red Rooster and also designed by Graham Harler, in its limited lifetime provided an equally concise exercise in colour and form. Western Australian chain Chicken Treat, established in 1974 continued this type. While incorporating a small dine-in section, the first stores were simple box like buildings capped with a bright yellow and red trimmed double mansard roof.

These restaurants, which have had varying levels of commercial success, illustrate key examples of Australian fast food chains, which appeared in the immediate wake of the Australian fast food around the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite the almost complete lack of extant examples, they remain important markers of Australia's developing food culture and a move towards a more commercially oriented culture, which occurred before the saturation of the market and introduction of industry shifting ideas like the drive through restaurant and home delivery. This small group of buildings present a carefully planned exercise in roadside architecture, relying on colour and modern graphics to draw the drivers' attention, distinct from both the browned American chains and competing novelty road side restaurants like the Eltham Wine Barrell (1968) designed by John Tipping, King Arthur's Table in Perth and the later Smorgy's designed by Peter McIntyre.

Conclusion

While the roadside restaurant industry was much slower to develop in Australia, there has been a consistent and steady stream of experiments carried out since the humble hamburger caravan and pie carts of the 1940s. While the drive-in restaurant was a largely unsuccessful type, the fast food revolution of the 1970s has left a legacy of roadside architecture across the country which has had an enormous impact on the urban landscape. These restaurants remain the most visible and enduring example of the rapid expansion of Australian road network and the postwar 'motor car age' of architecture. Like other roadside typologies, the architects and the architecture of the roadside restaurant made a significant contribution to the changing landscape of the postwar period and this contribution deserves to be recognised. As has been sketched out briefly here, from the unbridled Americana of the 1960s drive-in, the nostalgic curio of Ollie's Trolleys, to the assured and sophisticated exercises in local take-away restaurants like Neptune's Fishbowl, Red Rooster and Chicken Treat there exists a considerable body of work which presents an important episode within Australia's internationalist shift of the postwar period.

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