Brunswick Street Lost

Miles Lewis

Introduction

The papers presented here have for the most part focussed on the first decade or two of Fitzroy's history, and given Fitzroy's claim to be Melbourne's first suburb, that is natural enough. But history did not stop there, and even if this is not the place to survey the rest of the story, one must at least ask what has survived from those early decades and what has perished. Brunswick Street south of Gertrude Street has survived remarkably well, not in its original but in its late nineteenth century form. North of Gertrude Street is a different story, for the east side, which contained much early fabric, was destroyed by the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1969-71.

The Decline of South Fitzroy

As we have seen, the last really positive developments in South Fitzroy were those associated with the exhibitions of 1880 and 1888-9, when houses in the western part were upgraded to accommodate exhibition visitors, a process which as we have seen extended as far as Brunswick Street, though no further east than that. What followed this burst of activity was the depression of the 1890s, which of course affected Melbourne as a whole, but had a more lasting effect upon the inner areas.

The economic conditions caused population to emigrate from Victoria as a whole, and this was especially true of the rentiers in the inner suburbs. Even Fitzroy architects like Norman Hitchcock and Olaff Nicholson emigrated to Western Australia, never to return. And when the halting recovery gained momentum after 1900 the inner suburbs were not the place to be. The aspiring homeowner wanted a detached house on its own plot (though not a quarter acre, as legend would have it). The great stores of Smith, Gertrude and Brunswick Streets – Foy & Gibson's, Ackman's, Johnston's, Moran & Cato – like those in Bridge Road and Swan Street, Victoria Street and Sydney Road, lasted a little longer, because they lay on the tram routes to the new suburbs. But as car ownership rose and suburban shopping centres developed, and as major retailing moved to the central city, these great suburban stores successively closed their doors. The inner suburbs were now seen as areas of seedy businesses, slums and undesirable terrace houses.

The inner suburbs in general, and Fitzroy in particular, were occupied not by people who aspired to be there, but by people who could not get out. The apartment houses of the nineteenth century became the seedy boarding houses of the twentieth. The brothels remained, but their clientele declined in quality. More industries were promiscuously mingled with the housing. By 1911 Fitzroy found itself in the sights of the first slum enquiry.

The sorts of ad hoc facilities and crowded living conditions which could be cheerily endured by pioneers like the Beales, looked very different when the suburb was densely settled and the buildings were showing the ravages of age. It is easy today, looking at photographs of the demolished areas of Fitzroy, which included some of its earliest and most interesting buildings, to lament their loss and wonder at the philistinism of the authorities. And it is true that they were condemned in part because of conditions such as overcrowding, which were more the fault of society than of the physical infrastructure. To pull down houses because they are overcrowded is like destroying lifeboats in an effort to prevent shipwrecks. At the same time, however, the physical conditions were often dire. There were houses with earth floors, no water supply, and collapsing roofs. Some were beyond repair, while others would today be snapped up and renovated by the middle classes. But a hundred years ago who could predict that?

Up to 1912, 351 properties in Fitzroy had been condemned under orders obtained by the Fitzroy Council pursuant to the *Public Health Act,* and 129 of these were demolished. The Joint Select

Committee upon the Housing of the People of the Metropolis of 1913, and its successor, the Royal Commission on Housing Conditions of the People of the Metropolis, of 1915-18, paid considerable attention to the state of South Fitzroy. A local plainclothes police constable, Bartolo [Bert] Mafferzoni, testified about the many small and overcrowded houses in a poor state of repair, whose occupants included transients and undesirables, some of whom were 'very dirty; very dirty people'. The larger houses had become boarding houses, also overcrowded.[1]

'Fitzroy: Existing Conditions '. Victoria, Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board 1936-1937, *First (Progress) Report with Appendices and Supplements: Slum Reclamation: Housing for the Lower-Paid Worker: Short Term Programme* Melbourne 1937), map A. Red houses are categorised as unfit for habitation, yellow as structurally sound but requiring extensive repairs and the provision of amenities, blue as habitable. Industries are hatched.

The depression conditions of the 1930s exacerbated these conditions. The housing reformer, Oswald Barnett, saw it as primarily a social issue, involving overcrowding, immorality and drunkenness. And it was endemic, if not actually inherited, in that two thirds of the parents of the slum dwellers had lived in slums themselves. For Barnett the physical conditions were secondary, though he skilfullly exploited them in the media, and took parliamentarians on a tour of inspection. The result was the establishment in 1936 of the Housing Investigation and Slum

[1] George Tibbits, 'Slums and Public Housing in Southern Fitzroy', in Tony Birch et al, *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb* (Melbourne 1989), p 128.

Abolition Board. The worst area identified by the Board was that bounded by Brunswick Street, Hanover Street, Little Fleet Street, Royal Lane, and Palmer Street.

'Slum houses built on allotments with a frontage of ten feet, Marion Street, Fitzroy (Vic.)'. F O Barnett & W O Burt, *Housing the Australian Nation* (Melbourne 1943), p 52

The Victorian Housing Commission was established in 1938, and at first reflected Barnett's ideals, in that it subsidised rents in the hope of enabling families to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty and deprivation. But over time it came to see its goals more in measurable physical achievements – the number of acres cleared and the number of houses built. When it acquired a former munitions factory at Holmesglen and turned it into the Concrete House Project, the deployment of precast concrete components and the construction of higher and higher blocks of flats became ends in themselves.

There were other forces at work in the area. The Brotherhood of St Laurence, established by Father Gerard Kennedy, took the view that the original goal of the Housing Commission, to rehouse those who could not afford to rehouse themselves, had been subverted by the concern of the Commission to ameliorate the general post-war housing shortage.[2] It tried to protect tenants from eviction by private landlords, but allied itself with the Housing Commission in its redevelopment activities. This was not really a contradiction in terms, because those evicted by the Commission were provided with new and better housing. It was only later apparent that some of the recipients of this largesse actually preferred their familiar surroundings and social network to a concrete box in a tower.

An interesting episode has recently been researched by Stephen Pascoe,[3] whose conclusions can be summarised briefly here. The housing shortage after World War II made it particularly difficult for university students to find accommodation, and when Melbourne University failed to take any action the Student Representative Council [SRC] took matters into its own hands, and in 1945 took over the lease of a delicensed hotel in Brunswick Street which was currently operating as a hostel. The prime mover in this was the SRC secretary Ian Turner, a returned soldier who was later to become a prominent labour historian, and it was he who became the warden.

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2 Brotherhood of St Laurence, *What's Wrong with Victoria's Housing Programme?* (Melbourne 1954), p 3.

3 Stephen Pascoe, 'The Brunswick Street Controversy and the Demise of Independent Student Housing', *UMA Bulletin,* no 30 (February 2012), pp 1-2.

FARRAGO

● The Brunswick St. Hostel is a disgrace to the University. This writer was shocked by the squalid conditions of this tumbledown building where Australian and oversea students live without many of the basic necessities of a home.

THEY LIVE IN A SLUM

By CLAUDE FORELL

AMID the squalor of Fitzroy, fifteen University students live in a building ravaged by old age and neglect and rotted by moisture. It increasingly threatens to collapse on top of them.

These students, residents of the Brunswick street University Hostel, are fighting a losing fight to make the place a decent home. But not for the want of trying.

After having looked over the building last week, I was not surprised to learn that only four of the 20 students living there last year passed their exams in November.

The dank and depressing atmosphere of the place does not make for efficient study or reasonably happy living.

The hostel achieved a brief spell of notoriety 12 months ago, when the owner, a city manufacturer, failed in his attempt to evict the students. He asserted that the students had not taken reasonable care of the premises.

But Mr. Addison, S.M. said in the City Court that he was satisfied, on the whole, that the 70-year-old building was old and dilapidated

Most rooms have been furnished blue or pink by ill-fitting furniture. Some students have quite luxurious coal installations.

Poor Furniture

"We encourage the boys to keep as much as possible," Miss Manson told me. Gaily-lit dart boards, record players, gramophones, and other luxuries were noticed.

The students with whom I talked were not complaining. They gave me supplementary information in matter-of-fact description.

Mrs. Francis, S.R.C. Housing Officer, gave me a list of things the hostel desperately needs. Many of these items were marked URGENT by the hostel's warden, John Jamie, who is not at present using:

2 beds.
2 mattresses.
20 blankets.
10 pillows.

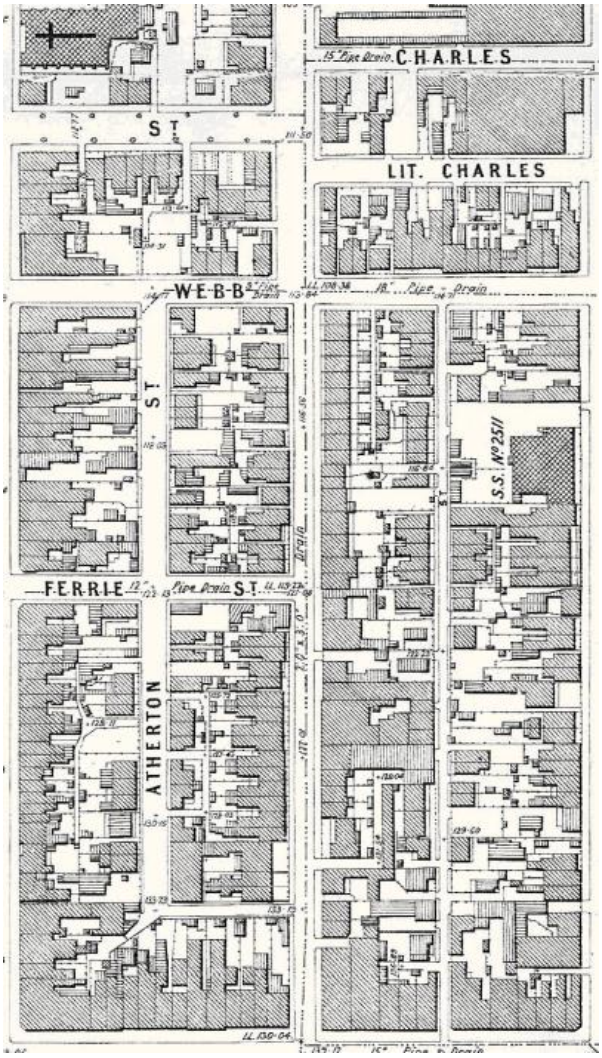
The Hostel Board of Management has just been reconstituted. It is up to them to do something—and soon.

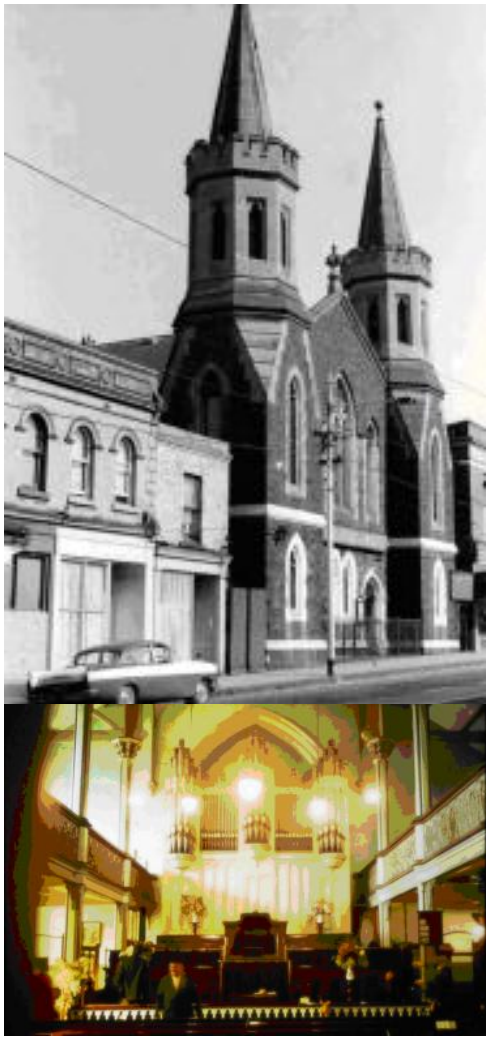
Claude Forell, 'They Live in a Slum', *Farrago,* 2 April 1952, p 2. The De Los Santos restaurant, 175 Brunswick Street, the scene of wild debauchery and political subversion in the 1940s and 1950s. Miles Lewis

The hostel, which officially had had sixteen occupants, soon became known as a place of wild debauchery. Stephen Murray-Smith, who lived there for a few weeks, recalled the lurid amatory adventures which took place, as well as the decrepit state of the structure and the intermittent flooding of the cellar. The University authorities remained or pretended to remain unaware of the situation, until they were forced to confront it by a court case in 1951, in which the owner of the building tried (unsuccessfully) to evict the students. It was alleged to be filthy, and to be serving as headquarters for the Communist Party. In 1952 the then warden was sacked on suspicion of having let rooms to non-students, including wharf labourers with Communist associations. In 1953 the Vice-Chancellor, George Paton, received a letter about the situation from none other than the Minister for External Affairs, R G Casey, later to be Governor-General and to become Lord Casey. But by now, it appears, the hostel had already been closed. The building survives today, as a restaurant, looking remarkably handsome and with no hint of its colourful history.

When the forces of conservation began to oppose the clearances, in Fitzroy and elsewhere, the Housing Commission was genuinely puzzled. Commissioners and officers who saw themselves as reformers in the footsteps of Oswald Barnett were now cast as philistines and vandals. In 1965 John and Laurie O'Brien won a battle to prevent the demolition of their house in Hanover Street. In 1969 the Housing Commission began clearing the Atherton Street Estate, on the east side of Brunswick Street, and demolished the Wesleyan Church. Then the National Trust stepped in to fight the demolition of the Wesleyan Mission Hall behind it. The Trust lost the battle, and one of Fitzroy's most interesting buildings disappeared, but it did not lose the war. The days of slum clearance were numbered. An attempt by the Housing Commission to repackage itself as an urban renewal authority soon failed.

South Fitzroy was henceforward to be revived at the hands of the burgeoning middle class. Young trendies moved in sporadically at first, but en masse by the 1980s. Today the threat is not so much the destruction of heritage as its fabrication, in the form of mock-historic cast iron lamp posts and dolls house style shop verandahs. But in southern Brunswick Street and its vicinity there remain some of the oldest surviving buildings in Victoria, as well as the intangible associations of even more importance which have been described in these papers.





The Atherton Street area, c 1900. Detail from Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works detail plan 28, Fitzroy, showing the Wesleyan Church, top left on Brunswick Street, Gertrude Street to the south, Napier Street to the east.

The Wesleyan Church Brunswick Street, by Crouch & Wilson, 1860-1, demolished by the Housing Commission of Victoria, 1969. Exterior photo by John Collins, c 1969: State library of Victoria H96.210/4; interior photo by Dawn Lumley.

The Wesleyan Chapel, later Mission Hall, by George Wharton, 1849, and Wharton & Burns, 1852, demolished by the Housing Commission of Victoria, 1971. Photo by Dawn Lumley c 1971.

Atherton Street Estate Fitzroy. Victoria, Housing Commission, *Thirty-Third Annual Report – 1970-1971* (Melbourne 1971), p 7.