Camp as...
Melbourne in the 1950s
Graham Willett

Melbourne in the 1950s — one of the world's great cities. The proud civic and commercial architecture, the broad boulevards, the parks, the 1956 Olympics, a thriving and lively arts and theatre scene... no wonder people were so proud of it.

But not everyone saw the city in quite the same way; *camps* (which is what homosexual women and men called themselves in the 1950s) moved in, and through, this city in ways that were their own. Camps used, even subverted, the public and civic places for their own nefarious purposes — for pleasure, for meeting each other, for living lives that were not at all as broken, tragic and lonely as so many *squares* assumed.

Camps, wandering the streets of Melbourne, might well be only half aware of the beauty of the city, being preoccupied by keeping one eye out for others of *our crowd*. A woman dressed in jeans and a shirt, her hair cropped short and slicked back. A man dressed just a tad too fashionably — a charcoal suit and salmon tie, perhaps; swishing a little as he walks. The occasional *screamer*, hair dyed, eyebrows plucked, hand flying as he talks; not caring who knew... or rather, caring very much: flaunting himself.

At any moment, while walking the streets, eyes might meet. A cigarette appears. A lighter is flourished. A casual remark: 'Isn't Melbourne very *gay* at this time of the year?' A casual 'yes' and the episode was over. Or a knowing smile instead, and something is just starting... only we use gay in quite that way.

And only we saw the city in quite our way.

The State Library, for example, with its grand classical facade, its rich collection of books and art. Camps observing it were as likely to ponder the meaning of the statues that graced the forecourt: Joan of Arc, a notorious cross-dresser; St George, mounted, naked, on his stallion wielding an impressively large lance; and those soldiers... *oh, my dear!* Is this perhaps the campest city in the world?

The courts and the cops: 'There are hundreds of perverts and we aim to get them all!'

The Hotel Australia and its upstairs bar

It wasn't all pleasure and play, of course. From the State Library, camp people looking up Latrobe Street could make out the Magistrates' Court and Russell Street Police Headquarters, twin sources of so much misery.

In the 1950s, antiquated laws against men having sex with each other were being enforced by the police and the courts with a new vigour. Parties were raided, names published, employers spoken to, lives ruined.... Every year, the number of men arrested, convicted and jailed was higher than the year before. Not that most of these cases ended up before the Magistrates Court. The crime of buggery was more serious and all but the most trivial charges were heard in the Supreme Court where harsh terms of imprisonment could be — and were — handed out.

A drink perhaps?

There were several pubs in the city which either did not notice, or chose to overlook, the knots of camp men that gathered in their own little corner on a regular basis: Scotts, Phairs, the Menzies, the Windsor, the Royal Arcade, the London, the Graham.

But *the* place to go was the Hotel Australia on Collins Street. The upstairs bar for the suit and tie crowd; well-dressed, with respectable occupations; discreet and understated. Or, downstairs, the *snake pit*, as it was known, frequented by *rough trade* and their admirers. Sailors, working class men, men just out of prison, looking for quick relief, or money, or somewhere to stay a few nights could find what they needed here. The Snake Pit was where the men who preferred their men manly would congregate. Or there was the option of the Tatler Theatre with the privacy of darkness.

Past Myers

An icon of Melbourne; two city blocks of world-class goods, with service to match.

Myers was an icon for camp Melbourne thanks to Freddie Asmussen, director of the Display Department. Freddie was a queen of the most outrageous variety, and all sorts of stories gathered themselves around him: his house in South Yarra with its thirteen chandeliers and black and silver dining room; his all-white garden; his office at Myers, the Gold Room, hidden away between floors and filled with gilt and chandeliers and wonderful things that he had brought back from overseas.

Freddie used his position to give jobs to camps, filling Myers with the young, the good looking and the creative, a team of young men who thought of themselves as *freddie's boys*. They were fiercely loyal to him, to each other, and to the store.

Val's perhaps?

Val's coffee shop, at 123 Swanston Street, was open all day and well into the night until the trains stopped. It was the place to go for the unconventional – theatricals, bohemians and camps. So glamorous with its wooden chairs and tables painted mauve, a royal blue carpet up the middle and parquet flooring. The lounge was lit by standard lamps with raffia shades and coloured globes. Val's was a place for coffee, music, flirting – a place of safety. A place where we could be ourselves.

Val herself was a striking figure, flamboyant and utterly unapologetic: 'I was a bit hard to miss. If I was out I wore a homburg hat and carried a silver topped cane. An Italian woman tailor made me beautiful suits which were well cut, in very good taste and extremely mannish. I got away with it because I wasn't intimidated. If I'd shown any sign of doubt I would have copped it'.

Or something racier?

For men, if all else failed, there was always recreational sex. Parks and public toilets, the City Baths, libraries and universities and museums, cathedrals, railway stations, beaches and streets all provided opportunities for men to find each other.

Melbourne was sequinned with *beats* which often had names, affectionate and otherwise: the Lobster Pot, the Flower Pot, the Holy Sepulchre, the Wailing Wall, Peak Hour Palace, Alma's Half-Way House, the Fifties and Over Club, the House of Jewels, the Police Special, Burwood Boys Bog, Fairy Dell, the Spanish Mission, Hartwell Haven and (at the Melbourne General Cemetery) Stiffies…

One of the most popular beats in Melbourne was the *chicken run*, which stretched from Princes Bridge southwards along St Kilda Road on the Domain side. As early as the 1930s, observers had complained of the *'tarts and painted queens'* that lingered there. By the 1950s, one patron claimed that it was possible to be propositioned up to 300 times a night as he promenaded up and down the Chicken Run. Perhaps he was exceptionally good-looking…

acknowledgements

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Curator

city gallery

Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street
Melbourne

gallery times

Monday 10am – 2pm
Tuesday – Thursday 11am – 6pm
Friday 11am – 6.30pm
Saturday 10am – 2pm

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