

Louise Forthun

When I walk through the city I always wonder — What are the factors that change the look of the city? How does it happen, and why? Why do some buildings stand out at certain times and at others become part of the city fabric? How much is planned and how much is not?

Two years ago I visited Venice to see the exhibition 'Cities, Architecture and Society' at the 10th Biennale of Architecture. Feeling inspired, I decided to create a series of paintings that would attempt to map how cities change. I began to research historical aerial photography, selecting a view of Melbourne taken in 1928 to use as a basis for this city's composition eighty years ago — 'Then'. To present a current version of Melbourne, I photographed a similar view from a tall building as the compositional base from which to create 'Now'. The Southbank development is featured in the blue painting, 'Tomorrow'.

It is my aim that these paintings, together with the historical material on display, will provoke interest in and further questioning of the ever-changing nature of our city.

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Can anything be more flagrantly inharmonious than to see an edifice of eight or twelve storeys standing alongside of a building of only two?
~Letter to Australasian Builder & Contractor's News, 1890

Melbourne's height limit is a relic of the Lilliputian mind.
~Age, 1930

These monstrosities in architecture have come to stay in America... Such buildings could only be possible where the ideas of beauty and symmetry — as contrasted with mere magnitude and magnificence — are more or less crude; and where the sense of personal ownership overshadows all consideration for the rights or conveniences of the public. That this spirit has not spread to other countries is a matter of supreme gratification, and I think in the interests of this City that definite limits should be set to the height of Melbourne buildings...
~A.C. Mountain, City Surveyor, 1906

Although I believe that tall office buildings are forbidden by the Melbourne building regulations, perhaps this is a wise restriction, for with the increasing danger from hostile aircraft it would appear that our future city development lies underground.
~Letter to Herald, 1937

The waste of precious inner-city space by ridiculous midget buildings surviving from colonial times has done much to create the notorious Melbourne sprawl.
~Herald, 1955

With New York's experience as a warning, no city will ever again allow free-for-all skyscraping.
~Robin Boyd, Herald, 1955

Acknowledgements

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Design by Round

In the first place, it was Louise Forthun's paintings that put me in mind of UP. They take the view — and give it back — from the other end of UP: a view of Melbourne from above that meets my rising gaze from the footpath.

Thus put in mind of UP and Melbourne, my imagination cast back in time. Hadn't there once been, in Elizabeth Street, a building that was tallest in the world? So people said. And it was almost true.

The building that the directors of the Australian Property & Investment Company dreamt up for their pocket-sized allotment at the Flinders Lane corner had been 15 storeys high. Now, this was 1887 — boomtime Melbourne — and the city's leading men were dreaming big. Too big, in this case. There were practical limits to how high you could build in brick and stone. The plans for the Australian Building were revised to 12 storeys, still putting it among the tallest in the world and making it, without question, the loftiest in Australasia.

A pity about its site. Elizabeth Street is the city's lowest point, having started life as a gully. With hills rising east and west and the river at its foot, the street forms a natural stormwater drain. In wet weather during Melbourne's early decades, it regularly relapsed into a chain of waterholes and, until as recently as the 1970s, a cloudburst could transform Elizabeth Street into a churning torrent, bound for the Yarra. Stand as tall as it might, in such a position the Australian Building would never stand out as it ought to.

In America's big cities, buildings were soaring ever higher. But the steel frames that supported them were denied to Melbourne buildings. Here, Melbourne City Council building regulations continued to insist on old-fashioned masonry — brick and stone — for structural support. For every additional storey in height, a building's walls had to be made correspondingly thicker. The thicker the walls, the less floorspace to rent; at a certain height, a tall building became unviable.

The Australian Building was that certain height. It didn't help that its completion coincided with the beginning of the end of Melbourne's land boom. Stocks in companies with 'Property' and 'Investment' in their names plummeted quicker than one of the new hydraulic lifts. In that climate, the Australian Building struggled to find tenants; in fact, it would never pay its way.

At 150 feet (46 metres), the Australian Building was deemed too tall for Melbourne. Its thick walls squeezed out light and air; the fire brigade's tallest ladder couldn't reach the seventh floor; and Melburnians were never much impressed by the look of it — if they noticed it at all. On a poky 'little' street corner, in the city's ditch, and with the dead-end of Flinders Street station hard by, the Australian Building was not well placed to be noticed.



The Melbourne Building Act of 1916 finally permitted steel-frame construction. At the same time, though, a city building height limit of just 132 feet (40 metres) was imposed — a rebuke, in effect, to the Australian Building.

In the 1920s the regulations were amended to allow the addition of ornamental towers and spires beyond the maximum building height. And up they shot: the Manchester Unity, the T&G, police headquarters, and dozens more. To all appearances, the Australian Building was nothing like the tallest building in Melbourne. But still it was, in terms of occupied (or occupy-able) height.

The topic of the building height limit flared from time to time over the decades. Progress-minded types argued that the restriction was holding Melbourne back, 'a relic of the Lilliputian mind'. Supporters of the height limit pointed to cities like New York where, it was said, skyscraping office workers had to leave work in shifts, to prevent pandemonium on the footpaths.

Melbourne's height limit was still in place — the Australian Building still ostensibly tallest — in early 1955 when an application was received by the City of Melbourne for a skyscraper 20 storeys and 203 feet (62 metres) high. In establishing their Australian headquarters high on the city's eastern edge, Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) aimed for 'one of the finest office building projects in Australia'. Superlative stature being a vital element, the height limit had to go.

To that end, ICI and its architects (Bates, Smart, McCutcheon) lobbied the State Government to bypass the fuddy-duddy city council and grant approval under a 'modification' of the government's own Uniform Building Regulations. Architect Robin Boyd, a regular commentator for the Herald newspaper, added his strong support.

Melbourne City Council's Traffic & Building Regulations Committee was still weighing — or rather, measuring — up the ICI 'cloud-kisser' (and 'from all accounts,' wrote Robin Boyd in the Herald, 'the proposal has not been greeted with Moomba-like spirit') when, in June 1955, approval was granted by the State Government. Within months, the precedent became law and Melbourne's height limit was abolished for good. ICI House opened in December 1958. 'As refreshing as a glass of iced water,' Boyd called it; 'an abominable glass anthill', said artist Norman Lindsay. Either way, it was an instant landmark and flagship of a city going up.

The Australian Building, meanwhile, was going down. Its elegant slate roof, with turret and dormer windows, was lopped off in 1957. Twenty-three years later, condemned as a fire risk and overshadowed by its neighbours, Melbourne's long-time tallest building was demolished. And, adding insult to obscurity, in its place was built a concrete box just five storeys high.

Robyn Annear

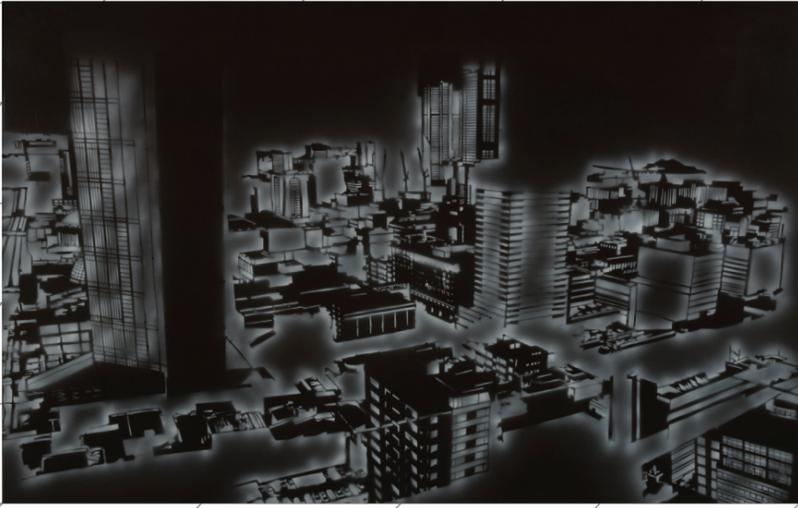


Building Works Outside
Melbourne Town Hall (detail) c1961
B & W photograph handprinted
from original 2 1/4" negative
City of Melbourne
Art + Heritage Collection

Exhibition Dates
28.08.08 — 30.11.08

Gallery Hours
Monday 10am — 2pm
Tue—Thu 11am — 6pm
Friday 11am — 6.30pm
Saturday 10am — 4pm

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall
Swanston Street



Louise Forthun
Now 2008
 126 x 190 cm
 Oil on Linen

courtesy of the artist;
 lforthun@bigpond.net.au



Louise Forthun
Then 2008
 197.5 x 231cm
 Oil on Linen



Australian Building,
 looking north-east
 Glass negative PROV, VPRS
 12800/P1, Unit H1922
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1-4. Drawing instruments
 from the City of Melbourne's
 Art and Heritage Collection

4.



3.



2.



1.



ICI Building, Melbourne
 Postcard, c. 1960s
 Private collection

Melbourne Hydraulic Power
 supply pit cover
 City of Melbourne

