

1956 Olympic Decorations: the final fling

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The aim of this paper is to provide a historical and visual record of the city decorations for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. It aims to document the architects, designers and locations of the decorations, and their context within this period. It will contrast commercial decorations with the Olympic sponsored decorations and outline the way in which they reflected the perception of Australian culture in the 1950s. It aims to determine the source of inspiration for each of the decorations and examine how they signified the end of an experimental era in Melbourne architecture.

The 1956 Melbourne Olympics were the crowning achievement of the so-called Melbourne School and its architecture in the postwar period. Combining both rationalism and expressionism it was daring in its acceptance of new technology despite the limited local expertise in such construction. The postwar period at Melbourne University's School of Architecture, under Professor Brian Lewis, saw a mix of those recently returned from military service with a younger group who had avoided the maturing experiences of war. Through these associations a high level of cross fertilisation of ideas took place, acting as the catalyst in the development of some of the boldest experiments in postwar Australian architecture.

It was Robin Boyd who aptly summarized this period when he observed:

What sensations, what excitement, what inexperience! Whatever happened to that promise? It subsided in Melbourne ten years ago, in 1957, after a final fling around the time of preparation for the Olympic Games.¹

The Melbourne School

For the 'Melbourne School', structure was fundamental as architects found solutions in the balancing of forces via tension and the geometric ordering of space.² Central to this period of work, as Boyd argued, was the idea of the search for significant form and individual expression, in keeping with the parallel art movements of that time such as Klee, Picasso and the work of Le Corbusier.³ It was a period of romantic form-makers with experimental skillion roofs, bright primary colours such as tomato red and cadmium yellow and copper cone-shaped braziers.⁴ Peter and Dione McIntyre looked to form through geometry and structure with the coil-shaped Snelleman House (1954), Beulah Hospital (1952) and the McIntyres' River House at Kew (1955). Tensile construction was also put to use with the Sidney Myer Music Bowl by Yuncken, Freeman Bros, Griffiths & Simpson (1956-1959). Meanwhile John Mockridge

was building butterfly-roofed houses in the eastern suburbs with planes of brightly coloured walls, while Robin Boyd and Kevin Borland were experimenting with Ctesiphon shells in Jordanville (1952-54) and Eltham (1952) respectively.

There was an air of competition and one-upmanship which was productive - "even though it produced leaking roofs".⁵ The period had a unique vitality and confidence that has not been equalled since for it had the essential ingredients of the Melbourne School: "a great structural-functional idea carried out with an enforced austerity and a voluntary cavalier technique."⁶

Boyd recalls the emotion:

What a feeling of fight and challenge spread through Melbourne's little architectural world at that time! ... What enthusiasm abounded when the latest Peter McIntyre or Kevin Borland house was unveiled. It was the European revolution happening all over again, a generation later. ... It was a time of some awful errors but of many brave tries.⁷

Olympic Swimming Pool

Undoubtedly the most notable structure of this period was the 1956 Olympic Swimming Pool designed by Peter McIntyre, Kevin Borland, and John and Phyllis Murphy. It was this building that was the most successful in representing this spirit of optimism as Australian architecture was given a taste of national identity. Boyd as the assessor of the competition entries wrote that this winning design was an "excursion into the unusual," would be discussed all over the world and more hopefully, that it would "carry the modern architectural revolution in Australia out of the field of small buildings commissioned by progressive individuals into the realm of big business construction."⁸

But the most spectacular effect, which rates the adjective "revolutionary", occurs at the long side of the building. Here the heavy downward thrusts of roof and seating, normally requiring thick columns for support, have actually been reversed. The heavy sides have no means of support. The roof on which they hang is the nearest practical approach to a "sky hook". Instead of columns there are only light tension cables (two inches square) pulling upwards and acting as stabilisers against wind loads. This is an example of full and sympathetic co-operation between architect and engineer - something which is seen only too rarely.⁹

It was this union between architect and engineer that characterised this remarkable period. It would not have been at all possible without the input of engineer Bill Irwin whose influence is not always given the acknowledgment it deserves.¹⁰ Boyd wrote:

The two climactic buildings of the period are on opposite sides of the Yarra River at Swan Street Bridge: the Olympic Pools Building and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl - symbolically, popular palaces of sport and culture respectively. These buildings had in common two elements: tensile construction and Bill Irwin, an engineer with the courage of his architects' convictions.¹¹

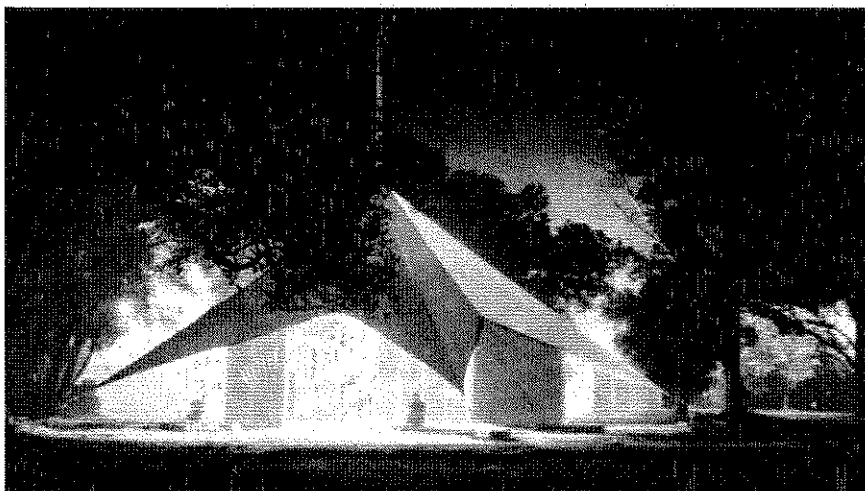


Figure 1: *Central Pavilion*, Botanic Park, Adelaide, 1956.
Source: *Cross-Section*, 45 (1 July 1956): 1.

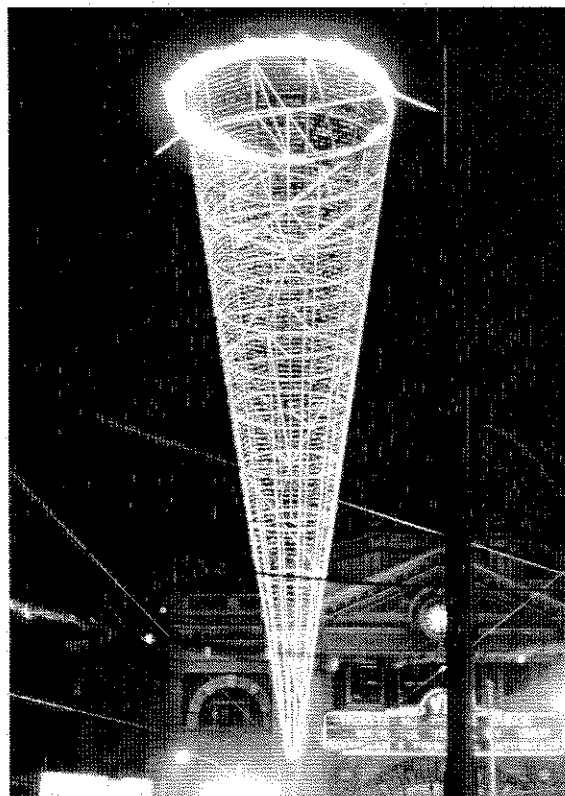


Figure 2: *Torch*, Melbourne, 1956. Designers: Peter & Dione McIntyre
Source: courtesy Titcher Collection, Australian Gallery of Sport, Melbourne

Irwin was instrumental in the design of not only these buildings but also in meeting the challenge of decorations that at times seemed impossible to not only build but also to erect and fix safely. According to Irwin, the engineering calculations surrounding the Olympic Decorations and the Olympic Pool were incredibly time consuming, the result of what he termed a “fetish about lightness”.¹² The main external source of inspiration during this period was found primarily through international architecture magazines such as *Architectural Review*.¹³

Arising directly from the Olympic Pool commission, McIntyre, Murphy, Irwin and other members of the competition team were appointed to the Design Committee for the Olympic Games Decorations for Melbourne.¹⁴

Before it was ever dreamed that the Olympics might come to Melbourne, the city's streetscape image was shaped by three significant events. The first of these was Melbourne's Centenary in 1934 when a new idea for a street element arose in previously conservative Melbourne.¹⁵ Specially designed for the event, decorative pylons, consisting of a series of inverted fibrous plaster cones, flood lit by concealed light along a height of 9-12 metres, ‘giving the effect of strong radiance’, were placed at intervals of eighteen metres through the principal streets of the city.¹⁶ The second significant event was the remodelling of the city for the 1954 Royal Tour. During this time many buildings were decorated red, white and blue and renamed (the Elizabeth Hotel, for example).¹⁷ This was followed shortly afterward by the Melbourne Autumn Festival, later to be called Moomba, when decorations described as “of the tritest and most facile character” were hung from the tramlines and street lights.¹⁸

Another potential precedent for the Olympic decorations was the Adelaide architecture exhibition in early 1956. The most dynamic structure was the central pavilion (fig 1) that was bright and bold in its use of colour and tensile structure. Within this pavilion was a collection of recent photographs of architecture from all parts of the world:

This pavilion was the gayest and most dramatic, as well as being superior to its nevertheless handsome neighbours (glass, steel, concrete and brick, timber, respectively) in its direct choice of a form so suited to the material.¹⁹

Melbourne: ‘bland and British’

In 1956, the American magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, referred to Melbourne as “a bland and gracious city of a million and a half [people], which in the past had offered only staid British hospitality for staid British people”.²⁰ But, according to the magazine, the continental influence of post-war migration on lifestyle and food, and enthusiasm for the coming Olympics promised to change this. The 1956 Olympics would help to renew a sense of pride in a city that was described by its Lord Mayor as “a city that was in the doldrums, a metropolis whose civic pride was wilting”.²¹ Many committees, companies and individuals worked to ‘dress up’ Melbourne in the year leading up to the Games. In particular, the Melbourne City Council and the Olympic Civic Committee organised a number

of contemporary street decorations which to the style-conscious observer epitomised a contemporary approach to design.²²

Let the decorations begin

The Olympic Civic Committee selected focal points within the city for special treatment. Chosen for their high exposure, the sites included the intersections of major vehicle routes through the city, such as Swanston and Collins Streets. The budget set was generous at the time and amounted to £32,000.²³ The Design Panel included a mix of architects and graphic designers who were individually responsible for the design of the decorations. All designs had to be submitted for approval with the added input of Ken Myer and Don Chipp.²⁴ Another part of the Committee's job was an exhibition of architecture and sculpture to be held in the newly-built Wilson Hall and the publishing of a souvenir book on Australian architecture.²⁵

The chairman of the design committee was architect Robert Eggleston with the design panel composed of architects Don Fulton, Peter McIntyre, John Murphy, John Mockridge, William Gower and Brian O'Connor, and designers Max Forbes and Richard Beck. The specialist engineer was Bill Irwin, with architect George Mansell as the "illuminating consultant". Seven decorations were designed under the Committee's guidance.

Olympic Torch

It was with typical enthusiasm that Peter & Dione McIntyre designed the most visually prominent decoration. Designed with the firm's trademark structural bravado, a giant Olympic Torch (fig 2) was positioned at Melbourne's gateway to the city on Swanston Street, on axis with the monumental Shrine of Remembrance. "At night, Melbourne had truly become, for the 1956 Olympics, the Athens of the south".²⁶

The steel framed torch was sixty feet high and twenty feet in diameter at the top, and suspended on four cables twenty-five feet above the intersection of Swanston and Flinders streets.²⁷ It was held in position by cables tied back to four supporting posts and from there to concrete and steel counterweights. In some cases these cables were attached to buildings where positions for the counterweights were not available. The torch was stayed with four additional cables running from the top of the torch to the top of the support posts. Each of the four main cables was post-tensioned. Gas was pumped via copper pipes into the framework and the top member of the torch formed the burner. It was lit electrically and had a flame three feet high.²⁸ The *Age* described it as "belching colored smoke by night, and sparkling in the floodlights".²⁹ Eighteen thousand two-inch bright metal discs covered part of the torch reflecting floodlights in vibrant colours at night. Many people couldn't understand why the torch wasn't completely covered with metal disks. The reason, however, was that only a sixth of the framework could be covered due to the "terrific wind pressure".³⁰ Some of those who remember the torch were disappointed by the fact that it did not have a larger flame at the top, and instead rather resembled a Peters Ice Cream

The Final Fling

Cone on fire. This response was also consistent with that expressed by the *Herald's* cartoonist, Weg.³¹

The torch was donated by the Victorian Chamber of Manufacturers and was erected during the early hours of Sunday morning, 21 October 1956, taking approximately eight hours.³² From 12.30 am to 1.30 am all electrical cables for the trams were removed to enable the erection of the torch.³³ A police car then escorted two trucks from South Melbourne, which brought the torch in two sections.³⁴ Two cranes with eighty foot jibs then lifted the sides together, while gas company workmen fitted their equipment at the top.³⁵ The four-ton torch was then hauled into position - the highest point being ten feet above the tallest cranes.³⁶

Melbourne's Olympic glory - a sixty foot burning torch - was floated above the Swanston and Flinders Streets corner in a six hour show of smooth organisation on a Sunday morning.

While all the media reports gave the impression that it was a fairly simple operation, what is not widely known is the potential debacle that almost eventuated. According to the Chairman of the Olympic Decorations Committee, Robert Eggleston, "it was a hell of a span" and the project almost came unstuck when the logistics of erecting the torch overwhelmed the builder responsible "black Jack" McDougall of McDougall & Ireland.³⁷ At 3 am, with seventy men waiting around for instruction, cranes in position and tram wires down everywhere, McDougall walked off the job in sheer frustration. It was at this point that engineer Bill Irwin stepped in and managed to redeem the situation by overseeing its final erection.³⁸ During this period there was a great degree of camaraderie between professionals due to their respective involvements in World War II. Risson, head of the tramways, had placed great pressure upon the installation of the torch, requesting that it be installed by the time of the first tram scheduled the following morning. Once Risson established that Bill Irwin had been a lieutenant in the army, his fears apparently were allayed immediately.³⁹

Despite these complications the torch was generally perceived as successful and as an avant-garde structural solution carried through with finesse and precision.

Pride, and perhaps the smallest (but quite pardonable) touch of boasting glistens as surely as the tinsel flash from that silver torch floating in the air at the Swanston - Flinders Street intersection. There, world and all visitors from inter-State, is a feat of mathematical conjuring.⁴⁰

By the time the torch was put into place, the decorations programme was 75% complete.⁴¹ The torch was however not lit until Friday, 16 November 1956. It made a lively spectacle that brought gasps from the crowd when the gas flame burst forth twenty seconds after the Premier (Mr Bolte) had turned on the city's carnival lights.⁴² There was an exactness to the timing of this event, as the Gas & Fuel Corporation had to boost the gas supply at just the right moment to cope with the added demand created by the torch.⁴³ Police were called in to handle the traffic jams as thousands detoured around the main decoration points. The

traffic chaos was further accentuated when home-going theatre crowds joined sightseers and congestion was heavy until almost midnight.⁴⁴

By the next evening the torch had run into problems. The ignition system failed, much to the dismay of the thousands who made the trip into the city to view the spectacle. Such was the fate and challenge of architectural experimentation.

Haymarket Tower

In the lead up to the Olympics, Professor Brian Lewis, from Melbourne University's School of Architecture, set as a subject and competition the design of an Olympic decoration. The winner was Alan Nance, a student whose original design consisted of a one hundred and fifty foot pole with strings of coloured spheres (fig 3).⁴⁵ The spheres symbolised the Olympic rings and were to be suspended from arms at the top of the pole with flags of the seventy-five Games' nations to be hung above tram wires at the roundabout.⁴⁶ Compared to the final design, this original proposal was far more exciting.

The design that was built however differed considerably consisting of eleven inverted pyramids, alternately white and red, made of canvas and ropes, and which were floodlit at night by forty-four lamps lent by the SEC.⁴⁷ The one hundred and fifty foot high tower was loaned by the NSW Electricity Commission and manufactured by the Electric Power Transmission Co of NSW, who erected and dismantled the tower free of cost.⁴⁸ Its location beyond the city grid, near the University, was somewhat out of the way and thus its potential impact was lessened. At one stage, the Haymarket Tower fell victim to an end-of-year University prank as it was entombed in roll after roll of toilet paper.

The design reflected influence from London's Festival of Britain (1951) which had been held to commemorate the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Like Nance's design, the Sky Pattern at the Festival of Britain also included a light steel framework, decorated with coloured balls. Designed by architect Edward Mills, the Sky Pattern was designed to provide a lively silhouette against the sky and to distract the eye from the buildings visible beyond the exhibition.⁴⁹

Gum Leaf Pylons

One of the most dynamic schemes, with a Constructivist quality, was the pair of gum leaf pylons designed by architect William Gower. Gower had been chief architect of the SEC and had liaised with all levels of Government. He was seen as a kind of a father figure to the younger generation of architects.⁵⁰ The pylons were an expressionistic gesture of structural simplicity and the abstraction of organic forms. The forty-four foot pair of pylons were located at the intersection of Victoria Parade and Nicholson Street and were built of steel tubing in an open web pattern, with forms of welded rod fabric representing gum leaves wrapped around them and supporting Olympic rings.⁵¹ The composition was reminiscent of a dismembered SEC pylon driven into the earth. The gum leaf pylons also recalled the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain (which had been designed by architect Ralph Tubbs and used a similar structure), as its supporting

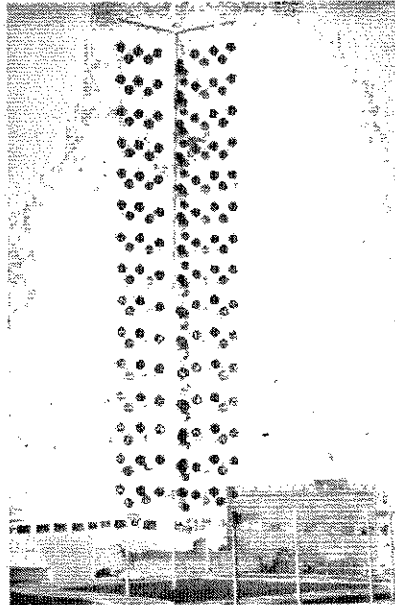


Figure 3: *1956 Olympic decoration*, Melbourne, 1956. Designer: Alan Nance.
Source: *Cross-Section*, 44 (1 June 1956): 1.

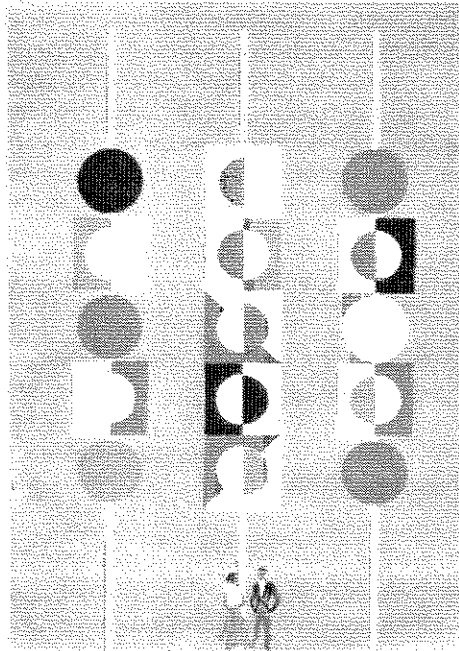


Figure 4: *Spinmobiles*, Melbourne, 1956. Designer: Richard Beck.
Source: *Cross-Section*, 44 (1 June 1956): 1.

struts, encircling the building, were forty-five feet in height. The pylons were painted in brilliant fluorescent colours and linked at ground level, across the intersection, by a pattern painted in white traffic paint on the roadway. Floodlit at night, the gum leaf pylons were striking and one of the more exuberant experiments with colour and form.

Spinmobiles

At the intersection of Alexandra Avenue at the end of St Kilda road, stood two 'Spinmobile' decorations designed by graphic artist Richard Beck (fig 4). Beck is possibly best known for his design of the Olympic Games Poster, the four storey high mural at Hosies Hotel, and for his timeless design for the Wynn's Coonawarra wine bottle label. The tubular steel columns stood forty-seven feet high and were sunk three feet into concrete.⁵² The rectangular metal framework was five feet wide, while the circular revolving spinmobiles themselves were three feet six inches in diameter. Made from sheet metal painted with high gloss enamel in Olympic colours, the Spinmobiles revolved on ball bearings, giving a kaleidoscopic effect. They however remained locked in position until the concrete bases of the pylon hardened.⁵³

Aboriginal Motif

Also designed by William Gower & Associates, was an aboriginal-inspired decoration that consisted of a one hundred and sixty feet long screen of five steel wire ropes stretched across the intersection of Bourke and Russell Streets. It rose from sixteen feet high at the south-east corner to an attachment on a pole one hundred and twenty feet above the pavement at the north-west corner. The motif was taken from one of the cave paintings of the Australian Oenpelli aborigines at Unbalanja Hill, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.⁵⁴ This arguably token effort to include the nation's indigenous people received many different responses, including the following expressed by the *Age*:

there is chuckling elan in the way those exuberantly female aboriginal figures chase each other across and up on the diagonal at the corner of Russell and Bourke Streets.⁵⁵

The design followed the fetish for lightness. It was constructed from aluminium tubing, loosely hinged at many points. The tubes and the wire ropes were covered with PVC tubing and laced with PVC ribbon. The builder contracted for this decoration was E A Watts who was also responsible for the Olympic Stand then under construction at the MCG.⁵⁶

Four Wheels

The Four Wheels decorations were located at the four major intersections of Swanston and Elizabeth Streets with Collins and Bourke Streets.⁵⁷ Designed by architects John Murphy and John Mockridge, each wheel included spinmobiles with circular metal vanes in the Olympic colours, and all spinning on a vertical axis. The revolving wheels were designed to create a pattern of light and colour.

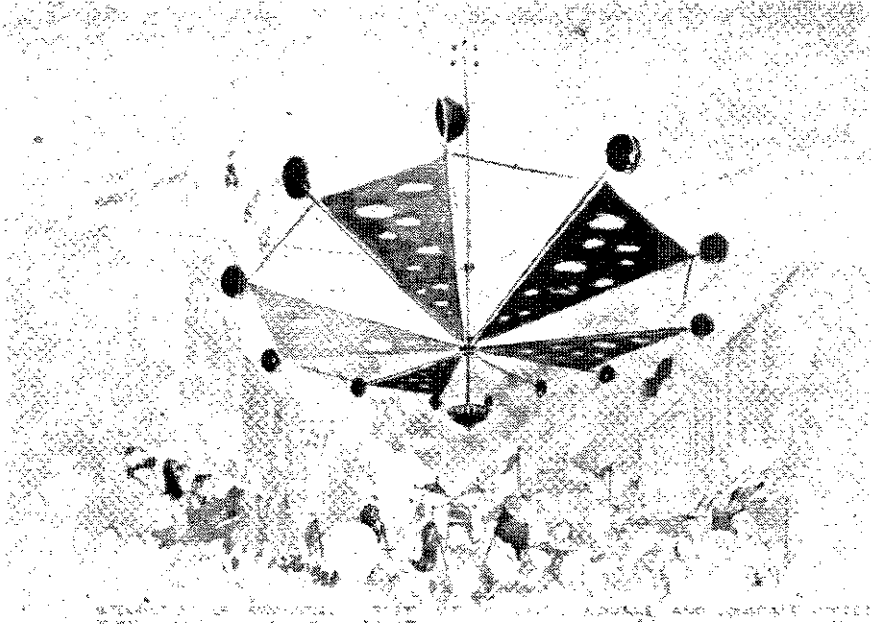


Figure 5: *Four Wheels* decoration, Melbourne, 1956. Designer: John Murphy.
Source: *Cross-Section*, 44 (1 June 1956): 1.

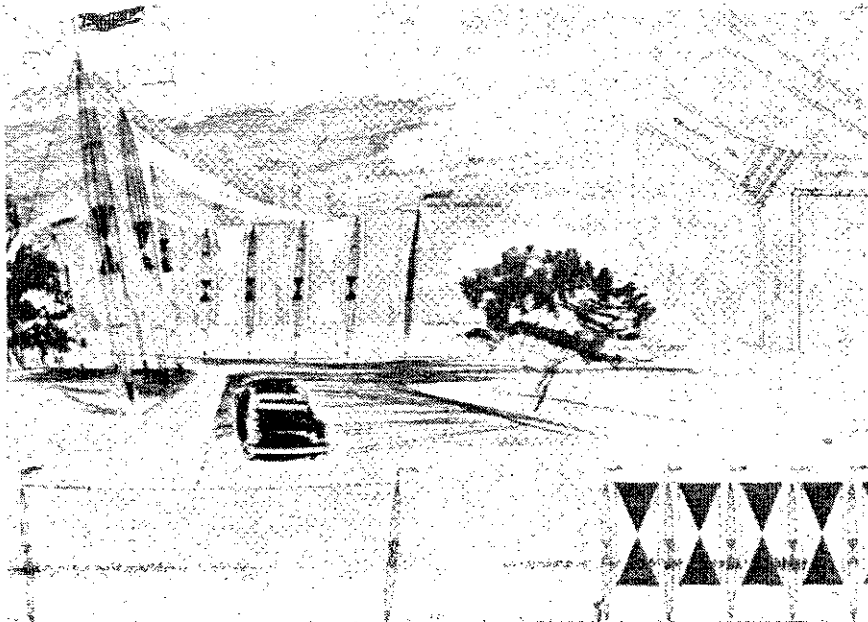


Figure 6: *1956 Olympic gateway*, Melbourne, 1956. Designer: Donald Falton.
Source: *Cross-Section*, 44 (1 June 1956): 1.

Suspended from the adjacent buildings, the wheels were thirty feet high with a diameter of forty-one feet three inches and a total weight of twelve hundred pounds.⁵⁸ The wheels were valued at £1500 each and were constructed from tubular steel with twelve orange coloured spokes radiating from a central column, hung with six foot by two foot six inch pennants in Olympic colours (fig 5).⁵⁹ One of the difficulties of suspending decorations above the roads was the slightly overpowering scale of the buildings and the adequate fixing of them to the buildings.⁶⁰ To avoid interference with tramway cables and yet covering the greatest possible area, the wheels were opened up like umbrellas after erection.⁶¹ After they had been erected however, the decorations faced the problem of the cloth flags being tangled around the spokes.⁶² And so while the torch was being placed in position in the early hours of the morning, John Murphy climbed up a fifty foot crane and balancing on the top proceeded to replace the "flapping flags with stiff flags on the wheels".⁶³

Unfortunately 'the wheels' faced a degree of criticism in the 'News of the Day' section in the *Age*, though somewhat tongue in cheek:

Circular frameworks, resembling rotary clothes hoists upside down hang from the wires at Swanston Street intersections with Collins and Bourke Streets. Gay pennants take the place of the washing and coloured discs are at the end of the outrigger arms. Discs in the colours of the Olympic rings decorate the inverted apex of the framework but they are of unequal size.⁶⁴

John Mockridge was also involved in designing a 'hovering triangle' at the intersection of Elizabeth and Bonrke Streets.⁶⁵ It was a one-ton inverted dart in Olympic colours, but there is little photographic record of this decoration. Instead concept drawings record this scheme.⁶⁶

Gateway to the Games

Designed by Don Hendry Fulton, the Gateway marked the entrance to the avenue leading to the main Olympic Stadium at the MCG (fig 6). Located over the intersection of Wellington Parade and Spring Street, the gateway consisted of twelve fifty-foot high pylons of welded steel tubing, six pylons on either side of the roadway.⁶⁷ The pylons rested on concrete footings and were guyed to each other across the roadway and down to the ground on either side with steel cables. Suspended between the pylons were huge diablo-shaped canvas banners with a red, white and blue British colour theme.⁶⁸ Fulton's design also has a clear connection with the Skylon from the Festival of Britain. The Skylon, designed by Powell & Moya architects, was a cigar shaped structure that used high tension cables to freely support itself and was also the main advertising feature for the Festival. A similar structural element was later to be used in the design of the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

From the tops of the pylons floated red windsocks and suspended centrally above the roadway was the Olympic Symbol, the rings being made of plastic tubing. At night the whole scheme was floodlit from saucers suspended in front of the banners and from cones within the framework of the pylons. The builders for

this decoration were G A Winwood.⁶⁹ Phyllis Murphy remarked that she “always admired Don Fulton’s Gateway to the Games. It was a more festive concept than most of the others”.⁷⁰

Another Gateway that graced the city was a shimmering screen of discs, rings and balls designed to flutter in the wind on Princes Bridge that continued about two hundred yards down Batman Avenue, leading to Olympic Park.⁷¹ The same effect was to be repeated at Swan Street Bridge and Batman Avenue. The screens were to be twelve feet deep and hung forty feet above the road. This was the work of Max Forbes, though there is little documentation of this work. Forbes was also commissioned to create the Melbourne — Olympic city poster to advertise Melbourne to Australian and overseas visitors. Its use of bold, flat, poster colours reflects the style of posters being produced in Scandinavia and Switzerland that Forbes had seen on his visit to Europe in the early 1950s.⁷²

National Gallery Forecourt

The involvement of architect Brian O’Connor was certainly less prominent though he did aim to turn the National Gallery forecourt in Swanston Street into a Continental-style piazza. It was a time when espresso bars were taking over the city, picking up the trade after the six o’clock swill with Pellegrini’s in Bourke Street being the first to open in 1955.⁷³ O’Connor’s plan included the setting up of a temporary deck over lawns, with tables, chairs and umbrellas including a row of flaming Olympic Torches lit for the opening of the Olympic Games Arts Festival that was attended by four hundred and eighty VIP guests.⁷⁴

Aftermath

Little is known of what was the eventual fate of the decorations except to say that Don Fulton, when in partnership with Ernest Milston noted that after the Games the decorations were stored in railway yards across from their offices in Jolimont.⁷⁵

The common theme of these seven decorations was the fetish for lightness. Whether this goal met with success is questionable. The excessive amount of cabling required for some of these decorations unfortunately undermined their design intent. To defeat gravity required a complex web of wires from shop fronts and poles. This meant that the best way to appreciate the decorations was at night. This was especially so with McIntyre’s torch, which looked far more impressive at night when the supporting cables were less obvious.

Heroic John

Apart from the main decorations organised there were also commercial decorations that provided partial insight into how Australians viewed not only the importance of the Olympics but more specifically their own culture and national identity.

“Bonrke Street, brash and bustling has served Melbourne faithfully, John Batman, magnificently bearded is as truly Australian as the giant muscled figures

of athletes atop the verandah are truly Greek and Olympian.”⁷⁶ Described as “The Olympic diorama”, the Coles Department Store decoration made a bold impression on the streetscape of Bourke Street.⁷⁷ Beneath a heroic John Batman rested the quote “This is the place for a village”, while behind ascended puffs of smoke from his campfire. With touches of Austerica, the rings of smoke symbolised smoke signals with the message: “GOODWILL TO ALL NATIONS”. This was not a surprising message, considering at the time there was war between Israel and Egypt around the Suez while Soviet troops had just taken control of Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania.

In Collins Street, Georges Department Store (in contrast to Coles) was more refined, with statues of Olympic athletes placed in each of the three arches above the store’s entrance. On the facade were two doves symbolising peace and goodwill to all, including flags from participating countries. Memories of war had far from faded. Decorations of a similar nature were also found at other main department stores such as Fletcher Jones, Foys, and Woolworths.

The commercial response for the decorations by Myer Department stores included sculptures of seven Greek athletes from various events, placed on the verandah canopy above the store front windows. Added to this was a collection of every participating nation’s flag with large Olympic rings dominating the facade. The impact of the Olympic decorations continues today with the Myer windows which were the lasting legacy arising from this event. The concept was devised by Fred Amussen, the Myer designer who convinced the store’s management to take the bold step of using the Bourke Street frontage to display fairytales rather than merchandise.⁷⁸ “The very first of the Christmas windows featured the nation’s newest toy — television — and a sporty Santa demonstrating his prowess as an Olympian” following athletes into the Olympic stadium.⁷⁹

One set of decorations that caused great bemusement were those which graced the facade of Flinders Street Station.

And everywhere the Olympic interlocking rings abound - from Flinders Street, where the railways have had the fancy to display them as oblongs (have the psychologists yet fathomed the symbolism of that?) to the smaller streets’ sweet shops, where ju-jubes now are interlocked.⁸⁰

Have you seen the Olympic circles running the length of the Railways building in Flinders Street? They’re oblong circles. Bit like the wheels on the train we came in on today.⁸¹

Meanwhile Melbourne’s Town Hall was graced with a highly nationalistic decoration reminiscent of Albert Speer and architecture of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Attached to the Hall’s facade was a series of vertical wires that were supported off the main facade. These were covered in white sheeting overlaid with the Olympic symbol and the Melbourne coat of arms.

End of an Era

After the Olympics, the confidence, dynamism and enthusiasm of Australia's cradle of post-war modernity faded. It would seem that commercial interests did not share young Melbourne architects' enthusiasm for experiment. Thus the longevity of the mood of optimism was short lived as many of these designers moved away from an avant-garde position and towards the commercial world to obtain financial security. Boyd aptly described this attitude when he stated that "Originality and invention are not outlawed here, but they must be kept strictly within recognisable bounds. Enlightened eclecticism is the rule and diffidence the dominant characteristic of our pragmatic, poor man's affluent society."⁸²

Boyd felt that the collapse in design confidence was linked to the graduates of the later 1950s, and there is more than a hint that he was disappointed with his own peers and his earlier students for not striving to reach new heights. Yet the architecture surrounding the 1956 Olympics remains a landmark of the so-called Melbourne School, articulating the design characteristics of its prime movers and the convictions that drove them. The Olympic decorations provided architects with exposure in the public realm and also the opportunity to collaborate with artists and designers adding to the richness of urban experience in Melbourne during the Games. Despite being a period marked by much publicity and criticism, the decorations seemed to avoid any real critical analysis as most professional attention was given over to the design of the Olympic Pool.

The aim of the Olympic decorations was to create an image for Melbourne that would surpass any other previous celebration. From aboriginal motifs to an inverted Hills Hoist, from an abstract gumleaf to the giant John Batman, the decorations pushed the boundaries of structure, colour and the search for a local identity. While it may be argued that the decorations were merely an arbitrary response, they did express the personality of the Olympic City in 1956 and the aspirations of what became known as the Friendly Games.

The streets of Melbourne have a new look for the Games... glitter by night, vivid colour by day, gaiety all the time. It is an attempt to reflect the true personality of the Olympic city.⁸³

...the decorations have been made and Melbourne has been scrubbed and painted as never before. This is not a Royal occasion calling for the pomp of heraldic symbols. Neither is the Moomba madness in the air with its sign manual of grinning faces and clown's cap. Yet the memory of other times of dressing up holds to give a standard for comparison with the finery that flutters now from overhead wire or city store front.⁸⁴

In the eyes of those involved there was a sense of disappointment as there was no underlying theme for the decorations.⁸⁵ Phyllis Murphy stated:

We were always sorry that there was no cohesion in the decorations. Each one was designed as a separate entity, clever and creative in itself, but with no relationship to the others.⁸⁶

Robin Boyd expressed a similar view stating that there should have been a top co-ordinating designer for the Olympics overall.⁸⁷ Coupled with this situation were also the local commercial decorations that were a blend of creativity, pure kitsch, or attempted nationalism. For those involved with the success of the Olympic Pool, enthusiasm began to wane as “the decorations were bit of an anti-climax after all the work of getting the Pool built.”⁸⁸ Due to the time constraints surrounding this busy period, the full potential of the decorations was never fully realised. It was also a time to glorify and worship the athlete, not the artist. This sentiment was illustrated on the front cover of the University of Melbourne literary journal *Meanjin* which depicted artists and sculptures arms outstretched in poverty as above them sprinted the athlete faster, higher, stronger to glory and riches.

The 1956 Olympic decorations provided a unique opportunity for Melbourne’s architects and artists, an opportunity that is not likely to be repeated again in that city. Today global corporate powers all but control the Olympics, with decorations viewed primarily as an opportunity to advertise and sell. The Melbourne decorations (in many ways) were the indeed the city’s final fling, in terms of independence and artistic authority.

When Boyd referred to quotes on ‘the spirit’ of architecture by the pioneers of early modernism, it was he who stated that architecture is not only the “technology of useful shelter” or the “art of beautiful spaces”, but “an expression of the age which builds it”.⁸⁹ The Olympic Decorations were an expression of this age: a *zeitgeist* of unbridled experimentation, whimsy, and a fetish for lightness.

Notes

- ¹ Robin Boyd, "The state of Australian architecture", *Architecture in Australia*, (June 1967): 459.
- ² Philip Goad, "Optimism and Experiment", *Architecture Australia*, (June 1990): 35.
- ³ Robin Boyd, *The Puzzle of Architecture*, Parkville, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1965, p 92.
- ⁴ The colours for the River House, Kew designed by Peter and Dione McIntyre were selected from the Tip Top paint range.
- ⁵ Norman Day, "Melbourne Vitalism Revisited: Architecture and Drawings from the 1950s and 1960s", *Transition*, (September 1987): 33.
- ⁶ Boyd, "The state of Australian architecture", p 459.
- ⁷ Boyd, "The state of Australian architecture", p 459.
- ⁸ Robin Boyd, "Olympic Pools Best in the World", *Age*, 30 December 1952, p 5. Note that Australian identity was also signified for the 2000 Olympic Games by a building, namely Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House.
- ⁹ Boyd, "Olympic Pools Best in the World", p 5.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Peter McIntyre by David Islip, 10 November 1996.
- ¹¹ Geoffrey Serle, *Robin Boyd: a life*, Carlton South: Miegunyah Press, 1995. p 269.
- ¹² Interview with Bill Irwin by David Islip, 1 May 1997.
- ¹³ Interview with Irwin by Islip.
- ¹⁴ Goad, "Optimism and Experiment", p 45.
- ¹⁵ Miles Lewis, *Melbourne: the city's history and development*, Melbourne: City of Melbourne, c1995, p 120.
- ¹⁶ Lewis, *Melbourne: the city's history and development*, p 120.
- ¹⁷ Lewis, *Melbourne: the city's history and development*, p 107.
- ¹⁸ Keith Dunstan, *Moomba: the first 25 Years*, Melbourne: Sun News-Pictorial and Melbourne Moomba Festival, 1979, p 13.
- ¹⁹ *Cross-Section*, 45 (1 July 1956).
- ²⁰ *Olympic Spirit*, East Melbourne: Australian Gallery of Sport, 1986, p 22.
- ²¹ Lewis, *Melbourne: the city's history and development*, p 108.
- ²² *Olympic Spirit*, p 23.
- ²³ "Olympic "Wheels" Brighten City", *Age*, 15 October 1956, p 3.
- ²⁴ Letter from Phyllis Murphy to David Islip, 18 September 1996.
- ²⁵ "Twenty Four Weeks to the Olympic Games", *Cross-Section*, 44 (1 June 1956).
- ²⁶ Goad, "Optimism and Experiment", p 45.
- ²⁷ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", *Architecture and Arts*, (November 1956): 24.
- ²⁸ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 24.

- ²⁹ "Lights, Gaiety in Golden Mile", Olympic Games Supplement, *Age*, 21 November 1956, p 2.
- ³⁰ "Torch will be kindled next Friday", *Herald*, 31 October 1956, p 5.
- ³¹ *Herald*, 27/10/1956.
- ³² "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 24.
- ³³ "Torch went up without a hitch", *Herald*, 22 October 1956, p 15.
- ³⁴ "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ³⁵ "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ³⁶ "Crowds see Erection of Giant Games Torch", *Age*, 22 October 1956, p 3.
- ³⁷ Interview with Robert Eggleston by David Islip, 12 November 1996.
- ³⁸ Interview with Eggleston by Islip.
- ³⁹ Interview with Irwin by Islip.
- ⁴⁰ S Sayers, "Melbourne: Olympic City in Party Dress", *Age*, 17 November 1956, p 2.
- ⁴¹ "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ⁴² "Crowds Watch City Lights Flash On for the Games", *Age*, 17 November 1956, p 1.
- ⁴³ "We'll see the lights tonight", *Sun*, 16 November 1956, p 3.
- ⁴⁴ "Crowds Watch City Lights Flash On for the Games", p 1.
- ⁴⁵ "Twenty Four Weeks to the Olympic Games".
- ⁴⁶ "The streets get the Olympic look", Lift-Out Souvenir, *Woman's Day*, 29 October 1956, p 39.
- ⁴⁷ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 24.
- ⁴⁸ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 24.
- ⁴⁹ "Festival of Britain", *Architectural Review*, (August 1951): 113.
- ⁵⁰ Telephone interview with Don Fulton by David Islip, 18 September 1996.
- ⁵¹ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 24.
- ⁵² "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁵³ The metalwork was supplied by Hopley's Pty Ltd and erected by A R P Crow & Sons of Yarraville. "Crowds see Erection of Giant Games Torch", p 3.
- ⁵⁴ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁵⁵ Sayers, "Melbourne: Olympic City in Party Dress", p 2.
- ⁵⁶ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁵⁷ "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ⁵⁸ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁵⁹ "Olympic "Wheels" Brighten City", p 3.
- ⁶⁰ Letter from Murphy to Islip.
- ⁶¹ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁶² "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ⁶³ "Torch went up without a hitch", p 15.
- ⁶⁴ "Decorations", News of the Day, *Age*, 15 October 1956, p 3.
- ⁶⁵ "The streets get the Olympic look", p 3.
- ⁶⁶ "Twenty Four Weeks to the Olympic Games".
- ⁶⁷ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.
- ⁶⁸ "Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956", p 25.

- ⁶⁹ “Olympic Games Decorations, Melbourne, 1956”, p 25.
- ⁷⁰ Telephone interview with Fulton by Islip.
- ⁷¹ “The streets get the Olympic look”, p 3.
- ⁷² Judith O’Callaghan (ed), *The Australian Dream: Design of the Fifties*, Haymarket, NSW: Powerhouse Publishing, 1993, p 39.
- ⁷³ Serle, *Robin Boyd: a life*, p 146.
- ⁷⁴ “The streets get the Olympic look”, p 3.
- ⁷⁵ Telephone interview with Fulton by Islip.
- ⁷⁶ “Coles Decoration”, *Herald*, 13 October 1956, p 5.
- ⁷⁷ “Coles Decoration”, p 5. There was some confusion however as to who actually were our great pioneers, with *Pix* magazine claiming that the heroic John Batman was rather John Henty.
- ⁷⁸ N Brady, “Windows to a wonder world”, Metro supplement, *Age*, 15 November 1996, p B3.
- ⁷⁹ Brady, “Windows to a wonder world”, p B3.
- ⁸⁰ Sayers, “Melbourne: Olympic City in Party Dress”, p 2.
- ⁸¹ “Black and White”, *Herald*, 13 November 1956, p 3.
- ⁸² Boyd, “The state of Australian architecture”, p 459.
- ⁸³ “Lights, Gaiety in Golden Mile”, p 2.
- ⁸⁴ Sayers, “Melbourne: Olympic City in Party Dress”, p 2.
- ⁸⁵ Letter from Murphy to Islip.
- ⁸⁶ Letter from Murphy to Islip.
- ⁸⁷ Serle, *Robin Boyd: a life*, p 150.
- ⁸⁸ Letter from Murphy to Islip.
- ⁸⁹ Robin Boyd, Transcripts of “What is Architecture?”, University of the Air, No 1, prepared for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1962, p 6, held Grounds, Romberg & Boyd Archives, Monash University.