First impressions of class: designs on life in Melbourne

Originally from the United States, I have lived in Melbourne for almost five years. During a recent Skype interview with a student based in the US, I was asked about my first impressions of Melbourne when I moved here. Fortunately, I had documented them at the time.

So I went back to my diary entries to see how much my experiences of living in Melbourne have changed.

The small experiences I had of Melbourne in 2009 demonstrates the life one can design in Melbourne from “outsider’s” eyes. Ironically, given The Conversation's focus on Class in Australia these past weeks, many of the observations indicate the minutiae of class distinctions played out through the sensory experience of place. So, here is a collection of my first impressions of Melbourne. Please excuse the American spellings:

- While Chicago (where I lived in West Loop) smells of chocolate, garbage, and fresh baked bread, Melbourne (where I am staying in Prahran) smells of eucalyptus trees, electric sparks (from the trams), and curry roasted meat.
I read the Aussie food labels and cannot tell how many kJ (kiloJoules) there are in a calorie.

Rooms are measured by measuring tape in millimetres: furniture in centimeters; small bottles in mL. Small 250mL bottles are tall and thin. NOTE: The United States uses US customary units as opposed to metric units.

The flow of pedestrian traffic on the side walk is the same as that for cars. People “drive” on the left hand side of the sidewalk. The same for escalators. I have already internalised the “look to the right” when crossing the street.

In Melbourne cinemas, you purchase an assigned seat in the theatre and they have a green, yellow, red colour-coding system to let you know when a show is available, filling up, and full, respectively.

Conversation overheard, “People are getting hit more with trams because of those darn iPods and such.”

In Prahran, which is a very posh area of Melbourne (median house price of Au$803,000) has what looks to be a large public housing complex. The inhabitants seem to be the elderly and European migrants, but I did not do a close study. It was surprising to be walking through rows of one-floor Victorian and Edwardian homes and see a towering monstrosity of high rises, straight out of the South Side of Chicago, or the Paris Banlieue, or Soviet architecture.

People seem to be very class/prestige conscious in Melbourne. This might be the effect of being a British colony/Commonwealth without a Revolution.

Shower over bath is an actual amenity when seeking housing.
The tram and train system is very efficient and gets you to most, if not all places, in the Melbourne inner suburbs. Tram and train ticket policing is very lax.

Melbournites have been very friendly to me in terms of striking up random conversations. My red poppies rain coat does serve as a good ice breaker.

Being a vegetarian in Melbourne is easy. There is always one or more very tasty option for vegetarians at any restaurant (at least the ones to which I have been to eat).
There are many great vintage stores on Chapel Street that are crammed with “valuable junk.” The clothing is more impressive than the furniture. Although I am so desirous to buy an Egg Chair for my flat, I just don’t want to pay the money for one (approx. $AU 600-800) because it would be the only furniture in my living room.

I will buy most of my fiction books second-hand. Books are relatively expensive here in Melbourne. Non-fiction, I will still have to get specially ordered, but most of the major design books are available here.

Summation: I really like Melbourne.