Interior Luxury at the Café Australia
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ABSTRACT
Chicaguan architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin moved to Australia in 1914 to realise their expansive vision for its new national capital city, Canberra. By contrast, their first work built here was a derivative interior, the Australia Café and Bar (1915-16) at temporary national capital Melbourne. An insertion within an extant building, the 'Australia', however, was not the first café to occupy 270 Collins Street East; the address was actually the locus of an interior architecture palimpsest. The Gunlder (not occupied the site in 1879, the Vienna (followed in 1899) and the Gunsler. The Gunsler was the primary venue for the importation of luxurious materials and the acclimatisation of novel surfaces that informed Melbourne's café scene along Collins Street. The Gunsler was the primary venue for the importation of luxurious materials and the acclimatisation of novel surfaces that informed Melbourne's café scene along Collins Street.

INTERIOR LUXURY
Although Australia Café, or Café Australia, has been evaluated, past scholarship has discussed its significance only within the confines of the Griffins' own oeuvre. Similarly, the Café has yet to be considered through the lens of luxury. 'Luxury' is defined as 'sumptuous and exquisite food and drink'. 1

Late nineteenth century Melbourne was a locus for luxurious interior architecture. Cafés, for instance, developed into rich environments comparable with their European counterparts. At the time, especially in London and Paris, cafes became luxurious social venues. In their survey Cafes and Bars: the Architecture of Public Display (2007), Christoph Grafre and Franziska Bollerey observe that, through time, the coffee house became absorbed into the patterns of everyday life of the middle class, emulating luxurious domestic rooms and salons. 2 In 1850s and 1860s, even Melbourne in the distant antipodes gained fashionable coffee houses. There, luxurious European-style cafes began to proliferate in the city's centre. On Bourke Street, for instance, the Café de Paris opened in 1858 and next the Crystal Café in 1861. Modelled after their Parisian Belle Epoque counterparts and London's Crystal Palace, the new cafés were luxurious within the Melbourne context: luxurious not only by their somewhat exotic stylistic associations but also owing to their imported building materials, furnishings and interior compositions. By the mid 1880s, the discovery of gold deposits in Victoria fuelled the Melburnian need to provide cafes and restaurants; up until then, the goldfields were catered for from tents. 3

French pastry cook, John Ferdinand Gunsler found his way to Melbourne in 1873 and would soon after several years' working in Melbourne, he 'advertised for a partner' to invest '£5000' to open a new café. 4 In 1878, Gold buyer Henry George Iles answered his call, forming 'Gunsler and Co.', purveyors, caterers, pastry cooks and confectioners. 5 The next year, the pair purchased the western third of a newly-completed commercial edifice at 29 Collins Street East, three stories high with a central arcade entry. Architecturally the building was apparently somewhat unusual. Categorising the structure as 'Romanesque', Australasian Sketcher reproduced an exterior view of the building and observed that the architect has endeavoured to satisfy the eye by the use of iron columns, so boldly placed in front of the plate-glass to leave almost no room to walk between the shop front and the columns. 6 The journal, however, did not identify the designer by name. Other features of the building attracted comment. 7
The architect’s ‘introduction of iron for the arcading’ and creative use of ceramic tiles to ornament the façade produced, it believed, created ‘novel and pleasing’ effects. These, however, put the building ‘a step in advance of the general street architecture of the city’. As we will learn, the Griffins, some three decades later, would erect a similarly ‘advanced’ structure at the same address.

Novel effects made the Gunsler Café unique as its interior surfaces blended unlikely cultural materials. Gunsler’s and Iles’ premises comprised three floors and a basement, located west or left of the structure’s central entry. London-born, Sorbonne-educated architect Lloyd Taylor (1830-1900) designed their café insertion; he was possibly also the author of the building itself. No interior images of the café have come to light. Australasian Sketcher, however, described the café’s fit-out in detail.

Gunsler’s Café has on the ground floor a large restaurant, 23 x 77 ft x 15 ft high, with counters for serving refreshments of all kinds to those whose time is too limited to seat themselves at the tables. The restaurant is lined all round with handsome mirrored and French polished cedar and Huon pine dado, 7 ft high, behind which the fresh air for ventilation is introduced. The counter bar and departments for serving oysters and coffee, with their polished marble table tops, are all fitted up with curved and moulded Huon pine and cedar.

As this description reveals, the Gunsler’s interior featured imported, that is luxurious, materials, like the French polished cedar dado. One native material, the Huon pine, was also used in the café interior, but not thought of as luxurious since it was a yellow-coloured timber and plentiful in Tasmania at the time. A period newspaper’s review of the café enlarges: it has ‘luxurious rooms reserved for the ladies’ and the basement contained ‘the necessary cellarage accommodation for storing wines and spirits’. There were intimate and private spaces within the Gunsler conductive to pleasure and the covering of the wall surfaces that transmitted a sense of this novel effect through imported and indigenous materials. This cultural kind of novelty was especially the case when the café had murals. Spatially the café was large; it comprised a restaurant.

In the 1880s, the scale of Melbourne’s café-restaurants expanded to hotel size. In an attempt to counter the strong lure of Melbourne’s [alcohol-serving] public houses, conglomerates of temperance-minded businessmen began building elaborate alcohol-free palaces. One of these new alcohol-free establishments, the Federal Coffee Palace (1886-8), was erected at the corner of Collins and King Streets, not far from the Gunsler. This multi-storeyed structure ‘applied the classical styles of Greece, Rome and Renaissance Italy’ and it ‘wiped with Palladian stucco’. Like its other Melbourne counterparts, the Federal gained luxurious connotations by its use of foreign, if not exotic, styles and imported Greco-Roman materials. Coffee was not the only preferred non-alcoholic drink as tea salons also eventually appeared in Melbourne’s arcades. By 1889 the city’s population had more than doubled, necessitating the renumbering of Collins Street. The Gunsler, formerly at 29 Collins Street, was now renumbered 270. This was not the only change. Despite an economic crash, the 1890s saw the arrival of more migrants, especially Greeks and Italians; many would eventually find work in cafés and restaurants. After the crash subsided, Australia enjoyed a boom of restaurant dining around 1890 - 1910 – the ‘late Victorian and Edwardian’ era of the English and ‘La Belle Époque’ of the French. Intriguingly enough, a Belle Époque-styled gallery of the Neapolitan type known as the Block Arcade was constructed (1891-3) three buildings west of the Gunsler. It soon became an expensive shopping destination. Ultimately, the Block became famous ‘as the place for the Melbourne elite to promenade’.

Café Gunsler soon proved popular. Novelist and journalist Marcus Clarke (1846-1881) visited the place and said it was ‘elegantly furnished and most expensively decorated’. During the day time the Café Gunsler was usually crammed with people. Stockbroker, bon vivant and Collins Street resident George Meudell (1860-1936) recollected the Gunsler as ‘a real European café-restaurant’, one ‘well conducted on Parisian lines’. By 1931, Australasian Home Beautiful could distinguish the Gunsler as ‘the best known café in Australia’.

INTOXICATING THE ‘VIENNA’

Around 1889, shortly before the Block Arcade appeared, migrant Austrian entrepreneurs F. Edlinger and J. Goetz purchased and re-adapted the Gunsler Café. Renaming it Vienna after their home town, the pair hoped to entice coffee drinkers and restaurant diners to a venue more Viennese than Parisian in feel. The project possibly required an architect; however, the designer’s identity is unknown. As in the instance of its predecessor, no images of the Vienna’s interior apparently survive. Consequently, it is impossible to determine the scope and extent of the Austrians’ modifications. Textual sources suggest that the ‘Vienna’ soon grew as popular as the Gunsler. One patron assessed its new incarnation ‘a very smart restaurant’, where one could dine ‘down the cellar on marble-topped tables’. There, as with the Gunsler before it, a table was always reserved for exquisitely dressed girls. Also downstairs, men sometimes ‘stood on tables and drank champagne and sang ‘God Save the Queen’’. No doubt the café served a lot of alcohol. Gunsler regular George Meudell now continued his patronage with the Vienna, characterising the new place as a ‘club for clever men’. There were no electric lights, another visitor reported, ‘only gas lamps’. One observer noted that the new Vienna Café served fish suppers [to people lounging] on plush settles. However, according to Melbourne artist R Emery Poole, there were no cocktails in those days – it was the twilight of “sane” liquor before the hectic dawn of American drinks. Although the Vienna Café probably then did not concoct cocktails in its bar, it more than likely served wine, spirits and beer. The city’s conspicuous displays of wealth proliferated but by the turn of the century the café-restaurant and bar became malodorous presumably due to the liquor odours in various places.
Edlinger and Goetz leased the premises to Greek émigré Antony J. J. Lucas (1862-1946) in 1908. Lucas had arrived in Melbourne in 1866, early working as a waiter at the Gunsler Vienna’s predecessor. Afterwards, he began his own entrepreneurial enterprise to furnish the public with dining, luncheon, tea, and supper rooms, so spacious, airy, and elegant as to gratify the eye and please the refined tastes of their patrons, while the quality of everything served up, and the table appointments and service, should be of such a character as to place the cafes on a level with the best of those which are to be met with in the great cities on the Continent of Europe.  

When he took over the Vienna, Lucas had already met with financial success and owned two elaborate cafes nearby, the Paris (1859) and Town Hall (1894). In 1915, Lucas purchased the Vienna outright. By then, however, the cafe’s clientele, along with its decades-old interior, had possibly deteriorated or perhaps fallen out of fashion. Moreover, the Vienna was now apparently locally known as a meeting place to indulge in pleasures other than drinking coffee. The cafe, according to Meudell, had for hire a number of shabby cabinets particulars, familiar to anybody who knows the boulevards of Paris and their purloins, where ladies and gentlemen may meet for all kinds of lawful and unlawful occasions. Now possibly a covert brothel, the cafe needed to change for the better and Lucas opted to renovate it. There were likely other reasons for this decision. Competition was probably foremost; by then, Melbourne was packed with rival cafes and restaurants.

The outbreak of World War I also compelled Lucas to change the place. In 1915, a group of intoxicated soldiers staggered down Collins Street and when confronted with the name of an enemy city, they stoned the cafe’s facade. Patriotism may not have been the only motivation for the vandalism. The damage might actually have occurred simply because the soldiers had arrived at the Vienna’s bar too late for the ‘6 o’clock swill.’ Previously, bars closed around 10 to 11 o’clock but to curtail people’s alcoholic drinking habits the new closing time instigated by the Victorian government was 6 o’clock. Whatever the cause, Lucas temporarily closed his cafe to erect the Griffins’ design.

Along with renovating the extant cafe, Lucas also planned to enlarge it, securing a lease to expand west into W. H. Glenn and Co.’s adjoining music warehouse in June 1915. Lucas’ ambition was, a newspaper sensationalised, to ‘construct one of the largest cafes in Australia, equipped and planned on the lines of those recently erected in London and Paris.’ The account also noted that Nahum Barnett (1855-1931), a well-known Melbourne architect, was to design Lucas’ cafe. Five months later, however, Walter and Marion Griffin were at work on the job. Why Lucas switched architects and how he came into contact with the American couple is unknown. By then, Walter had gained notoriety and visibility as Canberra’s author, at least in professional circles. As well, Lucas’ cafe was located in close proximity to Griffin’s office, just a bit further up Collins Street at 375. Coffee and tea drinkers, the Griffins may even have frequented the Vienna owing to its location convenient to their workplace. Whatever the catalyst for their contact, all three were linked as migrants, ‘outsiders’ to Melbourne’s social circles.

REMODELLING THE VIENNA

By November 1915, Lucas had contracted the Griffins to remodel and extend not only the Vienna’s interior but also its exterior facade. In a drawing dated that month, the Griffins proposed a two-storey high facade, covering Muller’s bookshop and the premises above, but leaving the original third story exposed. By July 1916, the scheme had been set aside in favour of a one-storey facade, possibly due to lack of funds. In the end, only the cafes main entrance and another for the adjoining bar were constructed (Figure 1).
Once the drawings were completed, the existing café’s exterior and interior were stripped. Original traces left from the Vienna, like the wainscots and the ‘shabby cabinets’ were all removed. They replaced the main entrance of the emptied-out Vienna Café with a Grecian whitewash of smooth stone (Figure 2). The Griffins clad the exterior square-arch entrance of the Vienna Café with refined details, demonstrating a lavish tile and stone, vaguely Mesoamerican geometric fantasy – at least seven square-headed archivolts of it.22

The café’s entrance corridor directed one to the left; it was enhanced with additional elements that unfurl a luxuriant Australian world — a succession of exquisite rooms — fern and fountain with ‘lively’ piers. ‘On entering the luxurious lobby with its comfortable leather couches,’ according to Marion Griffin, ‘the imagination is immediately appealed to by glimpses, through fern room and fountain court, to the main dining room beyond.’23 The ‘Australia’ restaurant had a reputation for being one of the places at which Melbourne high society chose to dine. ‘The Griffins,’ according to Christopher Vernon, reconfigured the restaurant into a linear, episodic sequence of three main rooms, each furnished with tables and chairs constructed of Australian timber to the couple’s design.24 In the Fern Room was a pair of white sculptural piers created by jeweller Charles Costermans (1888-1958). ‘One side of the column featured a port Jackson ti tree, emblematic of Sydney and its harbour,’ writes Vernon, and on the opposite side, she portrayed Melbourne’s distinctive Port Philip Fig.25 The surrounding walls of the Fern Room were lined with halved newel posts, which were ornate and designed to carry bowls of ferns and flowers (Figure 3). These posts were contrasted with other sculptural piers, extremely different from the Fountain Court’s Australian columns. Depicting the Greek nymphs of the three main piers, Margaret Baskerville’s sculptures of Daphne in particular, in the Fountain Court, Vernon notes ‘metamorphosed into a tree makes her inclusion comprehensible.’26

The Griffins’ Grecian themed-room design, seen here as a foreign and Australian alcove, outshone Melbourne’s coffee palace designs drenched with Palladian plaster work. The court’s piers were capped with concrete light shelves and Louis Sullivan-esque...
The ‘bizarre design,’ Donald L. Johnson writes, is ‘a subtle translation of European Art Nouveau and the Chicago School.’ Similar to Johnson, Karen Burns isolates the Griffins’ Fountain Court and likens its newel posts and piers with Sullivan’s similar newel post decoration in the Auditorium Building Complex (1889), Chicago. Suggesting that the Griffins’ ‘appropriated the vegetable matter proliferating across the entablature, mutating into the intertwined leafy vines and then flourishing as a floral outgrowth,’ the designs of these are quasi-sullivanesque. Burns then notes, the three piers ‘mutated from cuboid base along axes of growth and finally stabilised as caryatid forms.’ The caryatid-inspired or nymph piers recall the caryatids at the Erechtheion, the ancient Greek porch at the Acropolis in Athens. The Griffins’ positioned the caryatid forms as if they were facing away from the main staircase, grounded in the floor but set free from holding up the ceiling. Four faceted glass basins were fitted between the structural columns, screening one room from the other. The basins, replete with gold fish, were up lit with coloured lights. From the Fountain Court, one could peer through the refracted light to the Banqueting Hall. Here the Greek/Australian theme merges with richly quasi-sullivanesque details. At the same time the fish basins indicate the integral organisation of the space of the café.

The Banqueting Hall in particular was the loftiest space, featuring an up lit, richly perforated vaulted ceiling and Bertha Merfield’s Down in the Australian Bush mural in the foil of the upper gallery. The hall, accessed through two passageways, confronted colonnaded eating galleries, a balcony with light fixtures and on the back wall the mural (Figure 4). The mural was the Griffin’s abstract translation of European Art Nouveau and the Chicago School. At the same time the fish basins indicate the integral organisation of the space of the café.
As documented in the Griffins’ drawing of the Australia Café’s front elevation, the square-arch entrance was clad with various materials. The stones used were white quartz and Norwegian green pearl granite, authentic gold Delft tiles from Holland and prism glass installed as wall paneling as well as pavement lights. Beneath the Griffins’ design of the square-arch and refined dado line was the remainder of the façade clad with black stone, resembling opal with obsidian flecks. No doubt it was at the World’s Columbian Exposition (1893), when Marion, in her twenties, or Walter, a teenager at the time, might have visited the exotic Mayan architecture, like the replica of the Arch at Labna, must have inspired their design. Intriguingly, Mayan influences were incorporated in the Griffins’ work in the United States prior to their career in Australia, for instance the Frank Palma House (1911) in Illinois.44 The Frank Palma house in particular (also the ‘solid rock’ project) is compelling with its strong Mayan-inspired planes and Rattanier ornament; its façades uniquely appear in reverse in Café Australia’s Fern Room. The entrance demonstrated a new and unique aesthetic introduced into Australia at the time, an Australian Mayan Revival Style. This is important as it pre-empted the Griffins’ future designs in Australia in the 1920s, especially the Mayan inkings detected in the Capitol Theatre and at Castlecrag. It is unclear, however, as to why the Griffins believed Mayan references to be appropriate in an Australian context.

The Griffins’ ‘Australia’ design blends Australian indigenous motifs within the Fountain Court and Banqueting Hall in a Melburnian context. They appropriated the lessons they learnt from Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan in Chicago, but they reworked it in an Australian manner; meaning the work became soporific; they architecturally imbued the vertical surfaces with pale opal-tints. On the balcony level, flamboyant light fitting on top of squared columns, which were non-structural, pierced the space with the Banqueting Hall. Both of these luxurious spaces provided clues as to how they were projected in Australia Café’s interior design luxuriant and advanced at the time, a naturally lit space for eating at twilight.

The Griffins’ ‘Australia’ design also blends European cafes and bars within the Fountain Court and exterior façade in a Melburnian context. Brimming with ideas of the Australian bush for the entire place, the Griffins may have considered Sydney and Melbourne’s café-restaurants they possibly advertised his café in part where the Banqueting Hall and kitchen were located. Lucas advertised his café in his Argus, beneath the banner of ‘Melbourne’s Most Luxurious and Fashionable Café’. The vast, well designed, well lighted, airy kitchens are most modern in their equipment, and scrupulous regard is given to their spotless cleanliness.’45 The advertisement highlights the café’s kitchens as modern. Marion designed the menus as well (Figure 5), which listed real and mock turtle soup. The airy kitchens were two-stories high and were ‘immaculate with tile floors and walls, and equipped with the most modern culinary devices.’ The ‘Australia’ formed a reliable hygienic respite.

The design was the antithesis of all Melbourne’s other cafés in that it was modern and luxurious and the entry must have been a breath-taking experience. The Griffins included motifs drawn from the federal capital design, the Australian bush, America, Ancient Greece, Europe and Mexico. At the re-opening of the Vienna Café in 1916, it was renamed as ‘The Australia’. Emphasising ‘The Australia’ as the name of the café, the main dining space offered patrons a sophisticated picnic in the Australian bush in an elegant dining conservatory. The mural itself was a landscape of interiority, a sensual haven. The name change was possibly made to avoid any more attacks on the building façade and to distance itself from the former Vienna’s repute for the immoral behaviour of its patrons. Viewed in the context of their next major building, the Capitol Theatre, the Australia Café reveals a lot about the Griffins’ interior ambitions. As interior designers, they created a luxurious interior unknown to Australians and outsiders.
WRECKING THE ‘AUSTRALIA’

Not all Australians thought the Australia Café was spectacular. At least two influential critics disdained the Griffins’ design (and the couple themselves). In November 1916, only weeks after the Australia opened, architects George and Florence Taylor dismissed the café as ‘insane’ in the professional press. They attacked the building again in December: labelling the café’s entry ‘grotesque’, the Taylors even went as far as to urge Lucas ‘seriously to consider the reconstruction of this ground floor frontage on a more rational basis’, 48 despite the Griffins’ entry introducing a new aesthetic to Australia, a sort of modernism that trickled through other Griffin projects. 49 In November 1916, only weeks after the Griffin’s entry opened to the public, the Taylors wrote that the café’s entry ‘grotesque’, the Taylors even went as far as to urge Lucas ‘seriously to consider the reconstruction of this ground floor frontage on a more rational basis’.

Today, Melburnians are content to sip their coffee in graffiti-filled laneways. The building’s interior design was advanced at the time. In the end, Australia Café fell out of fashion and was sold in 1927. Then, in 1938, the twelve-storey Hotel Australia designed by Leslie M. Perrott and Partners was built over Australia Café, retaining its Banqueting Hall but not in its original forms – they painted over the murals, placed new furniture within the hall and then added a Venetian Court. The hotel, in turn, demolished in the 1970s and replaced with an ‘Australia Place’ shopping mall, today is the only reminder of what was Melbourne’s kith café de luxe. The Griffins’ design was not ‘insane’ in the 1920s. In the 1920s, the Griffins’ created exotic national ambiences. These ambiences were erased from 270 Collins Street. The Griffins’ interior design interventions were advanced at the time. In the end, Australia Café’s interior design was not ‘insane’, but the exterior was violated. Today, Melburnians are content to sip their coffee in graffiti-filled laneways. The Griffins’ design was not ‘insane’ in the 1920s.

Notes

1 For endless conversations about the Griffins and comments on the paper I would like to thank Christopher Vernon. On Café Australia see James Arden, J. Walter Burley Griffin, University of Queensland Press, (1946); Donald Johnson, The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin (Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1977) (Jeff Turnbull and Peter Y. Navarette (eds.), The Griffins in Australia and India: The Complete Works and Projects of Walter Burley Griffin (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 1999); Christopher Vernon, “The Silence of

though the Australia Café had now lost its lustre, at its prime the Griffins’ entry introduced a new aesthetic to Australia, a sort of uniquely Australiannised Mayan Revival, which exposed Art Deco nationally. Undoubtedly, Lucas was more than merely satisfied with his new Australia Café and Bar. In 1921, he facilitated the Griffins’ commission to design Melbourne’s Capitol Theatre. The theatre would prove even more dazzling than Lucas’ Café inside the Capitol Theatre, Mayan motifs would run not a thousandfold, an interior that embodied a sort of glamorous grotesqueness. Ultimately, Lucas’ café fell out of fashion and he sold it in 1927. Then, there was a 1930s refit. The new owners, amongst other interior interventions, removed its luxurious fittings – all of the Griffins’ furniture, replacing it with more traditional pieces. The interior itself was eventually dismantled, exposing the Gunser’s earlier murals. 48 In 1938, the twelve-storey Hotel Australia designed by Leslie M. Perrott and Partners was built over Café Australia, retaining its Banqueting Hall but not in its original forms – they painted over the murals, placed new furniture within the hall and then added a Venetian Court. The hotel, in turn, demolished in the 1970s and replaced with an ‘Australia Place’ shopping mall, today is the only reminder of what was Melbourne’s kith café de luxe. The Griffins’ interior design interventions were advanced at the time. In the end, Australia Café’s interior was accepted, but the exterior was violated. Today, Melburnians are content to sip their coffee in graffiti-filled laneways. The Griffins’ Café was a century ahead of its time and the Griffins’ created exotic national ambiences. These ambiences guarded the persistence of a Mayan/Australian design trend as a theme that trickled through other Griffin projects.

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