

Queen Victoria Was For Unity: The Union of Tradition and Modernity in the Queen Victoria Building

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This article examines the Queen Victoria Building through the union of tradition and modernity, in order to develop a better understanding of the site's contradictory nature and the ideologies that inform it and social structures more generally. By comprehensively analysing the site's architectural components and its contemporary functioning against theories of cultural identity, enlightenment, and capitalism, the Queen Victoria Building is discussed as a union of tradition and modernity exemplified. The article thus argues that rather than being two opposing concepts, tradition and modernity are inextricably linked. Tradition indeed exists in the present moment, evident in the architecture of the Queen Victoria Building and the economic operations of our societal structures, but it is through modern ideals that this perseverance occurs, with traditions constantly evolving in order to remain relevant in the present. It is within the union of tradition and modernity that the Queen Victoria Building and contemporary society are situated, and their paradoxical natures informed.

Keywords: Queen Victoria Building, tradition, modernity, enlightenment, industrialisation, capitalism

*Without one of my constituents,
I would never be;
Remove the other
and the first, would cease completely.*

What am I?

A paradox of historical proportions, it stands as Sydney's leading collection of fashionable stores within the historical concaves of an architecture that cries, '*Rome from where I was conceived – arch of my arch.*' It remains prevalent that the Queen Victoria Building – to be referred to by its commonly abbreviated name, the 'QVB' – is a carrier of tradition and, simultaneously, a shrine to the modern. But how does a site, which remains a testament to tradition yet is so thoroughly embracive of modernity, exist in the present moment and on which end of this continuum of social change does it truly lie? Understanding of the QVB, through its architectural components and contemporary use, is realised through the merging of tradition and modernity. Although the building's architecture is rooted in tradition, it appears evident that these structures have evolved over time to find relevance in the present, leading to the site's current operation of commercial stores. Such a transition reflects the impact of modern ideals on tradition, and demonstrates how society is constructed and

reconstructed through the union of these two frameworks, which alone bring understanding to the QVB and the present structures of society.

Because the modern world, commonly defined by progress of political or economic nature, instigated a societal transformation comparable only, in Bendix's view (1967, p. 292), to "the transformation of nomadic peoples into settled agriculturalists some 10,000 years earlier," the 'intellectual tradition' has remained a predominant theoretical paradigm through which several scholars construct a 'before-and-after' model of social structures that divide tradition and modernity into contrasting epochs of thoughts and practices, and highlight society's deviance from a traditional course it had "followed for millennia" (Nisbet, 1965, p. 20). Such an approach suggests the declination and to some extent extinction of tradition at the expense of rising modernity. This conceptualisation, however, fails to take into consideration the prospective coexistence of both tradition and change, and the interrelated variables that characterise and function within the so called *former* and *later* social structures of tradition and modernity, as prevalent in the architectural and operational components of the QVB. Society marks not a shift from one historical idea to another, but rather remains rooted in tradition, with tradition and modernity being a collective entity that oversees the progression of tradition under modern influence, rather than two ends of the continuum. As MacIntyre (1984, p. 221) expresses, tradition is "a specific past that is present to some degree in [the] present," and within this conceptualisation, the present can be seen as existing within the thin line between tradition and modernity; the "interstitial space that marks the cut between the two," (Mitchell, 2000, p. xxi), suggesting the union of these two concepts.

McRobert argues that because tradition is essentially the "heritage of the....evolved existence of things....tradition will always be" (Steil, n.d.), proposing the continual existence of tradition as opposed to societal progression from an era of the traditional past to that of modernity. Constructed in 1898, the architectural components of the QVB evoke traditionally developed styles distinctive of *Romanesque Revival* architecture that have persevered to the present day. A style reflective of Imperial Roman work which "preserved the round arches and massive qualities" that prominent architect Christopher Wren associated with "Roman art" (Krinsky, 1964 p. 20), the Romanesque was in itself a replica and carrier of preceding, traditional Roman architecture that had become culturally inherent to Roman identity. This "persisting identity" (Shils, 2006, p. 13) – a characteristic of tradition – evoked within the QVB, imagery of a prior cultural existence, and through its prominent Romanesque characteristics of round headed arches, colossal piers, gross capitals, timber ceilings and ornament, provided a continuity with Roman architecture.

From intellectual and Enlightenment perspectives, tradition is viewed as a "blind imitation of the past" (Phillips & Schochet, 2004 p. 4), with Weber (1978, p. 25) promulgating within this framework, the belief that traditions possess "ingrained habituation[s]" of courses repeatedly followed, illustrating the immutable or static nature of tradition. However, such a viewpoint fails to account for the prevalent changes that exist between the transitory styles of Roman, Romanesque and *Romanesque Revival* architectures, and the more general transformations of tradition in society. Because received traditions are subject to variations (Shils, 2006, p. 14), they can be understood as being "the living repetition that manages to suggest a fresh truth" (Crowe et al., 1999, p. 7). While the QVB possesses many of the archaeologically defined characteristics demonstrative of Roman buildings, the Romanesque – meaning "Roman-like" or a "foreigner domiciled in Rome" (Bullen, 2004, p. 141) – is merely a derivation of the 4 Roman style in altering its architectural traditions. Krinsky (1967, p. 20) highlighted in her essay *The Romanesque*, the desire of architects to import other styles to restorative forms.

The conception of Romanesque architecture, witnesses the evolutionary transition from traditional Roman art to its Romanesque state through the integration of the contemporaneous elements of Byzantine architecture – a style common to and largely promulgated by the Byzantine empire at the period of Romanesque inception – and Roman forms, utilising traditional Roman round arches and vaults, and complex Byzantine ornaments that scholar Thomas Gray considered “as crude as the capitals” (Krinsky, 1964, p. 20), illustrating a deviation from and modification of tradition.

These prevalent changes which exemplify the non-static nature of tradition are ideally encapsulated by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in their examination of ‘invented traditions’ as those traditions actively constructed by historical actors who instil values into the present in attempts to establish a continuity with the past. Because traditions ultimately gain authority from their context (Engler & Grieve, 2005, p. 4), they – in order to subsist – must correspond with the circumstances in which they function, possessing not a moribund condition but evolving through cultural and environmental manipulations that continuously mould their structures, in order to find relevance both at the time in which they exist and in the present moment, or as Engler and Grieve (2005, p. 3) suggest, “change....both in their actual content and in their interpretations....with historical circumstances.” It is through this evolving nature of tradition, that the construction of Romanesque architecture and the principles of its architectural developments can be understood. The forces behind this evolvment, both at the inception of the Romanesque as an architectural form in the 10th Century and the Romanesque Revival in the Victorian Era of which the QVB is a product, can however be attributed to modern ideals of Enlightenment.

In his essay, Kant (1784, p. 3) argues that Enlightenment, the state of liberation from one’s self-inflicted *immaturity* whereby one lacks the courage to use their own wisdom on account of their dependence on or subjection to another’s authority, is achieved through the use of “understanding without guidance from another.” Such use of reason, when public, is able to liberate the individual from the restraints of authority and alter former beliefs and practices. The creation of the Romanesque is defined by this notion of freedom in attempting to establish, at a time of decaying Roman art, a continuity with the past, albeit in a way that deviated from the conventions of former practices in daring to think beyond the parameters of what traditionally was. Such utilisation of freedom, through the liberal incorporation of early Roman and later Byzantine architectural elements, resulted in a Romanesque form that was considered an “unworthy corruption of the buildings of Rome....uncouth, rude and unformed,” (Bullen, 2004, p. 143). Thus, the development of the Romanesque can be attributed to modernity, having maintained the traditions of early Roman art whilst simultaneously altering these traditions through modern ideals of freedom, witnessing the union of tradition and modernity.

The revival of the QVB’s Romanesque architecture in the Victorian era – having been eclipsed by Gothic architecture – is further defined by this notion of Enlightenment through architect William Gunn’s inquiry through wisdom, into the cause, effect and roots of Gothic architecture of which the Romanesque was the root of. In bringing attention to Romanesque architecture through his use of public reason, where as a scholar he conveyed freely the conclusions derived from his rationally developed understandings of this architectural style, Gunn instigated a revival of the Romanesque form which progressed through Edmund Sharpe’s building of the first *Romanesque Revival Church* in a Victorian era dominated by Gothic Revival architecture. Sharpe’s public use of reason, not as an architect but as a ‘learned’ theologian and artist, challenged established practices in deviating from

conventionalised Gothic architecture – an act of courage critiqued for “opening a door to the most dangerous innovations....subversive of Christian Architecture” (Ecclesiological Society, 1842, p. 5). As such, the revival of the Romanesque style, which led to the building of the QVB in its traditional form, is defined by modern ideals of Enlightenment as illustrated by Gunn and Sharpe’s “inclination to and vocation for free thinking” (Kant, 1784, p. 3), highlighting the interrelated variables of tradition and modernity.

Though rooted in tradition through its Romanesque architecture, which preserves elements of Roman culture, continual refurbishments within the QVB are likewise explicated by the evolving nature of tradition through influences of modernity. The utilisation of subtler ornament within the QVB – a change distinctive to the transition from the Romanesque to its Revival state – can be attributed to the architectural forms of the modern movement which, emerging in prominence towards the end of the Victorian era, operated under the ‘less is more’ doctrine of simplified design. The continual existence of ornament within the QVB, however, highlights a preservation of the cultural and architectural identity of the Romanesque in the midst of change, albeit being modified through modern principles.

This modernity further functions as the source of development in the QVB’s incorporation of glass signage and escalators, adapting the arched windows and balustrade encased stairs of traditional Romanesque styles to the technological advancements of modern society so as to cater for the commercial function of the building. Such sustaining through constant change and negotiation so as to adapt traditions to “fit personal, historical and cultural circumstances” (Engler & Grieve, 2005, p. 142) concludes that rather than being static, traditions are subject to constant evolvment, with modern institutions continuously innovating their architectural styles to find relevance in the present through modern ideals. Thus, contrary to Weber’s assertion, society marks not a transition from tradition to modernity, but constantly evolves ‘living traditions’ within a matrix of unification.

Conversely, while its architecture is rooted in tradition, with over two hundred stores, restaurants and cafes the QVB’s function brings to the fore modern notions of industrialisation and capitalism that ultimately define its operational function. The union of technological and economic developments, and the progressive rationalisation of society through the “application of scientific reason to the everyday world” (Turner, 1996, p. xix), constructed a capitalist culture in whose framework the QVB is understood to operate. Although some critics argue that capitalism, as the system in which goods, services and labour are exchanged for profit, does not intercede with modernity due to the political nature of the Enlightenment and the rather economic nature of capitalism where the maximising of profit is fundamental, the freedom of market exchange between liberally contracting individuals and the progress of capitalist societies through wealth development, render capitalism, as Wagner (2008, p. 79) proposed “an elaboration of the Enlightenment promise” through their evocation of modern notions of progress and freedom.

The QVB’s privately-controlled trade and industry practices, exchange of merchandise between buyers and sellers, patterns of finance-production-consumption, monetary standard of value, and employment of labour within the private enterprise of its upmarket boutiques, are each understood to operate within the framework of capitalism in correlating with the three primary elements of the capitalist economy: a monetary system, market exchange, and private enterprise production of commodities (Ingham, 2008, p. 53). This capitalism, which defines the QVB’s operation and is an extension of the Enlightenment promise, subsequently highlights the influence of Enlightenment rationalisation on the QVB in its move into a

'capitalist modernity,' accounting society's current economic operations to the influence of these Enlightenment principles.

However, while this may suggest that the QVB, through its capitalist operation, achieves a state of modernity indicative of the complete evolution from tradition to modernity as opposed to the union of these two concepts, the employer-employee dynamic prevalent in its division of labour, evokes at the core of the QVB's capitalist function, traditional practices. Bendix (1964) supported the coexistence of tradition and modernity in industrial institutions, stating that tradition, as a changing element, is not "characteristic to nonindustrial societies" (Cole, 1973, p. 9). Though structural differentiation remains evident between societies in the present and those of the past through their adoption of industrialisation and capitalism, tradition likewise remains situated at the core of the QVB's operation in utilising traditional systems of 'rank-order.' These employer-employee relationships, of the labourers and those who oversee them, are as Bendix (1996, p. 366) asserts, "a new form of the ancient division of society into masters and servant." Such relationships, promulgated by the capitalist move in light of industrialisation, are thus merely 'living traditions' of subordination, evolving through time because as Shils (2006, p. 261) points out, "new machines....new methods of organisation of labour....create new circumstances of action and require changes in traditions in techniques of work." It can thus be concluded that employment within private economies is rooted in traditions that have evolved through modern ideologies, functioning through the unified forces of tradition and modernity.

Because capitalist societies maintain this tradition of subordination, they consequently, in doing so, limit the Enlightenment promise. Though suggesting economic liberation of trade through political emancipation, and promoting progress through economic and individual skill development, the employer-employee dynamic subsequently restricts the individuality and freedom of man. The cause of this limitation, as existent in the economic functioning of the QVB and capitalist societies in general, can be explained through Kant's (1784, p. 1) conceptualisation of freedom as that which occurs through the *public* use of reason, which "alone can bring about enlightenment among mankind." Because workers within the QVB act under the authority and instruction of management, adhering to a bourgeois-proletariat dynamic, their rational capacities are utilised within the restricted limits of *private* reason, with the labourer as Bonald (1996, p. 270) argues, "exercise[ing] his fingers but never his mind," thus preventing Enlightenment. This barrier is further propositioned through industry's employment of multiple workers which enforces "collectivism, mutual dependence and subordination," (Bendix, 1996, p. 372) by making, as Nietzsche and Hollingdale (1996, p. 366) point out, of many "one machine....teach[ing] the utility of centralisation." Thus, in restricting the freedom, progress and Enlightenment of the individual, capitalism is unable to complete sufficiently the venture of modernity.

Bendix (1967, p. 315) highlighted the importance of "prerequisites" as those basic characteristics fundamental for modernity's being and that each society must condition into existence before a state of complete modernity is achieved. Because it fails to complete the Enlightenment promise through capitalism, it can be concluded that society has never reached a state of modernity; an assertion promulgated by Latour (1993), who in recognising the contradictory nature of the modern constitution regarding nature and society, deduced that we have in fact never been modern. While it remains evident that the QVB and capitalist societies more generally adopted modern values in their pursuit of modernisation, the failure and limitation of capitalism prevents the attainment of a full state of modernity. This, in addition to the continual existence of tradition, suggests that modernity, rather than being a

historical epoch, is a system of ideologies – or as Foucault (1984, p. 37) suggests, a “way of thinking” – having instigated notions of Enlightenment, progress, industrialisation, and capitalism. Society from a contemporary viewpoint in reflection of the QVB’s capitalist operation therefore marks not a revolutionary shift from tradition to a complete era of modernity, but rather witnesses the evolution of tradition through modern values, rendering modernity an ideological link that situates a place for tradition in the present and connects the past to a contemporary reality.

As both the historical heart of Sydney and a current shopping centre, which introduced modern values to tradition, the QVB reveals the inextricable link between tradition and modernity in contemporary society, and the way that ideas within these two theoretical paradigms inform both the past and present moment. Whilst tradition functions as the root of society, providing its historical values, modernity innovates and evolves traditions so as to make them relevant in the present, and it is through this joint operation of historical ideas, that the QVB functions in today’s society – through traditions that maintain the building’s character, and modern ideals of capitalism and industrialisation that allow it to operate as a shopping centre in the present. This union of tradition and modernity remains prevalent, however, beyond the QVB’s traditional architecture in the midst of modern operations, to the finer elements that reveal the influence of modernity on architecture, and the prevalence of traditional roots both within our capitalist economies and the QVB’s operation.

Through these conclusions, modernity, as a system of ideas, can be understood to provide an ideological link of continuity between the traditions of the past and society in the present, giving relevance and “life” to evolving traditions so as to serve the progressive needs of society, rather than being an era situated between pre-modern and contemporary societies. Such a matrix exemplifies the union of tradition and modernity as two interrelated variables within the same continuum, coexisting in the construction of a complexly defined and often paradoxical present. It is only through this unified conceptualisation of tradition and modernity – the ‘modernity of tradition’ – that we are truly able to grasp and understand the QVB and the way that society and its architectural and economic configurations are structured, restructured, and function. And so the riddle posed is finally solved, the answer written between the lines: *I am a matrix of tradition and modernity*. The rest, as they say, is history.

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