The 1950s was for Australia a time of particularly high cultural cringe and low national self-esteem. I was then in primary school, and one of the few messages about Australia's cities that I received, in such classes as Social Studies and History, was that they were, apart from a few landmarks and what natural features each possessed, all the same.

Australia presented itself as a homogenous, if bland, society, where 'townies' and 'bushies' differed in their habits and skills, but suburbia was suburbia, and all the same. We lived in bungalows with gardens, and viewed the largely Victorian architecture of our cities with distaste. We looked forward to the new concrete and glass development with the same optimism we had for US-style appliances and cars. Culture was "the Arts" - and they were either imported, or bush lore. The whole of the effect of our emerging multi-culturalism was overlooked, as was the reming urbanity of our cities. The character of each city was differentiated only to the extent of simple catch-phrases - "(just) a big country town", "the city of churches", and simple images - port with docks, wide leafy streets, spires on the skyline.

Melbourne's image into the sixties was as the political and money capital of the country, untroubled by the emergence of Sydney, which had again outstripped in population its more recent rival even in the 30s, "the second largest white city in the Empire". Yet Melbourne struggled for a clear icon of its identity - its sole popular landmark was the painting of a voluptuous nude in a pub.

How surprising it was therefore, to visit Sydney and then live there, to travel to Brisbane, Melbourne and the other capitals, and to discover that their differences are not merely those of nature and a bridge here and there. Culture is expressed in physical form in the whole web of structures that make up the city. Thus even a short visit reveals that our cities are not just uniformly and blandly 'Australian', but the particular creations, over time, of cultures with significant differences. The varied effects of immigration in each city is incresaing these differences. And even the spoken accent changes - the Adelaide one is most clearly identifiable.

One striking architectural difference must surely reflect some deep cultural identity - the selected classical order of each city. There is a neat gradient according to climate. Hobart is almost astylar, sunny Sydney is refined and elegant Ionic, Brisbane and Adelaide prefer the fruitier Corinthian, whilst Melbourne sticks to Doric - both the Greek and the Romanised versions. It would be worth a bit of research to track down the stated reasons for the choice of order on town halls, galleries and parliament buildings, and whether there was any conscious realisation of the appropriateness of one or the other to a particular town.

So, Melbourne. Is it "the arts capital of Australia", "the best preserved Victorian city in the Commonwealth", "a great place to make a film about the end of the
world", "the second most liveable city in the world" (which makes me wonder who was number 1) or still just "Marvellous Melbourne"? Is the true image of the city trams rumbling through trees past Victorian architecture, or the melting Gay Lime grotto of WHOSE?? WHAT building in Collins Street. Certainly it is a place which has changed in recent years as dramatically as any city in Australia, yet which retains much of its sense of the past.

Now that Melbourne has such a reputation for entrenched traditional values, it is hard to regain the feel of the Victorian-period city, the pre-eminent Boom-Town: the fastest-growing and probably the wealthiest city on earth. It was a place where the poor got rich and the rich did deals that today smack more of the bottom of the harbour then the muddy flow of the Yarra.

It was a continuous building site, where the rows of new buildings were elaborate and ostentatious, where every park and street was adorned with costly stonework and fountains. A place whose speed and modernity made convict-period Sydney look completely dowdy and second-rate. From its founding, "Marvellous Melbourne" had taken only 30 years to outstrip the harbour town in wealth, power and population. In that period an empty plain was transformed into a busy wealthy community, with extensive infrastructure, cultural institutions and industry, housing nearly 1,000,000 people. Most of it was the result of the enormous wealth of the gold rushes pouring through the city - another blow to our equally-powerful 1950s myth of "riding on the sheep's back".

Something of that boom-town quality has recently revived. It is demonstrated not only by Kennett's extroverted style of government with its car races and casinos, but also by the private sector, with the various rival Grollo towers outdoing even Kuala Lumpur in phallicentric display. This spirit has produced vast and glittering new museums and galleries, and major urban projects which create whole new precincts. Such overt changes overlie the real, long-standing quality of Melbourne as a place of urbane and civilised life - where you could always get good coffee and good books, or find a quiet lush green park just down the street, or get from one end of town to the other easily and cheaply on a tram.

So what gives Melbourne its own particular character? What makes you feel that here is the manifestation of a culture that is not the same, here is somewhere which has real and individual soul, not simply a place which is flatter or older or bigger or wetter? A deep analysis of social values and structures is beyond the interest of this article, which is chiefly about the built environment - a generally reliable guide to the state of a city's cultural soul, however.

It is not hard to look beyond the jumble of late modern skyscrapers and whizzing freeways that dominate parts of each of our cities, to pick out some of the things that really are different in Melbourne, and which have been maintained over a large part of its development.
The first aspect which is apparent on looking at a map is the plan of the city. Melbourne belies another great classroom myth - that Adelaide and Canberra are unique in being Australia's only planned cities. Its "surveyors grid" is relentless in its coverage of the relatively flat landscape, here and there leaping the Yarra in curves and overlaid by expeditious diagonals. This efficient and comprehensible plan is enlivened by the varied planning of each subdivided great block, and has no equal in the country.

A clear demonstration of the quality of this plan is the way in which streets and neighbourhoods change their roles and develop individual identities, that don't seem to follow the grain of the surrounding suburbs as slavishly as happens in Sydney. Brunswick Street and ??? Street, Lygon Street and Chapel Street each have a face of their own, each lively and interesting.

Melbourne is also lucky in having the best public transport system of any Australian city - its wide boulevards and avenues allowed even the destructive 60s to retain what Sydney and Adelaide were only pleased to destroy - an extensive and well-patronised tram system. The same wide streets, joined by some new freeways which seem less intrusive than those which block Sydney and especially Brisbane off from their waterfronts, allow good traffic flow and generous footpaths, and significant tree plantings.

Melbourne has overcome the lack of real natural beauty by creating Australia's best network of parks and parkway avenues. Established in the days of public wealth and public spirit, these generous green spaces extend throughout the city, and are richly planted and enhanced by a profusion of well-built architecture - monuments, fountains, railings and walls, whose dark bluestone offsets the vivid green of the lawns and trees.

Whilst much has been destroyed, Melbourne has managed to keep a great deal more of its Victorian buildings than the other cities of the mainland, and the effect of new development, except in the case of Collins Street, has been less destructive of their urban presence.

Perhaps the fact that the buildings of Melbourne were so well built, and generally so much larger than those in other capitals, made them a little harder to tear down. Perhaps there were just more of them there in the first place. Certainly, the major public buildings of the city and Victorian-period suburbs seem exceptionally well-scaled and well-sited. Each stands on high ground, with plenty of room to stand back and admire the rich facades. Even the terrace houses are a bit bigger and more elaborate than elsewhere, and seem less cut up by intrusive new development.

A major part of the Melbournian spirit is manifested in its approach to architecture. No-one talks of a Melbourne School in the way that there have been two Sydney Schools, but surely it exists. It is not stylistically-based: there are no
clinker bricks and brown timber, or curved leaves of corrugated iron, to call up as signs. Rather it is a school of attitude, of intellectual stance, and interestingly it serves a community which is happy to have its architects build civic buildings which are inspired by wiggly photocopies of 1950s American houses.

This 'school of attitude' is fostered in the architecture schools, and is continued by some of the powerful patrons of the city - the local councils and the universities, the state government and private industry. It is represented by a strong and consistent magazine - "Transition", and has roots in the work of Robin Boyd and others from the 50s., It is heavily influenced by the work and writings of Venturi and by the polemics, if not the whole aesthetic, of Deconstructivism.

In the extreme manifestation of the Melbourne School, ideas are pre-eminent over material, the intellectual content of a building is conceived as far more important than its tectonics or order. This is in contrast to the other regional schools in Australia, which have been almost without exception inspired by function and form, by materials and climate.

At worst the products of the Melbourne School are gimmicky and paternalistic, at best genuinely inventive and engagingly odd. The paternalism is one which pervades modern architecture in two forms - one, straight Modern, says, "Give the proletariat efficient machines to live in and they will be happy healthy and reformed", the other, the Post-Modern reply, says "Give the commoners common stuff, made a bit quirky so that those in the know can have a giggle, and they will be content and we will be clever". Neither has been especially successful in its aims, although the heroic stance, debunked by the cynicism of PoM o, produced a wider range of better buildings.

How interesting is the contrast between this young, funky, adventurous Melbourne School and the perceived worthy conservatism of the town, characterised by 'old money' values and dour bluestone. How well it fits in, and how necessary it is to lighten up an environment which is apt to sink into excessive reticence. And how different it all is to the Sydney situation. Sydney prides itself on being the place of risk, superficiality and speed, but here, the same old designers churn out the same old stuff, job after job, and keep on getting all the work. And a lime-green facade in George Street would never get the nod from the planners, or the required support from the client in the first place.

All of this will not answer the question of why Melbourne is different. Is it the climate, the lack of a convict history, the rush of immigration and money brought by gold, the established wealth of the twentieth century which seems to have fought off the developers and the new entrepreneurs, the power base of banking and politics which never seems to lose its strength? Questions which will not be definitively answered, and which do not need answers. The real measure is the quality and specialness of the city itself, it buildings and streets, shaped by the lives of its people.