Interior Luxury at the Café Australia

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ABSTRACT

Chicagoan 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 diminutive 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 Gunsler first occupied the site in 1879; the Vienna followed in 1889. Antony J. J. Lucas purchased the Vienna in 1915 and contracted the Griffins to expand it. This study surveys the 'Australia' and its predecessor's interiors and positions all three within the city's wider café scene, aiming to cultivate an appreciation of the Griffins' café as a luxurious Australian-type venue. It argues that with the Australia Café's completion in 1916, the Griffins realised the most luxurious interior erected in Melbourne, if not the country; their design involvement established a new rich avenue of 'Australian' luxury bolstered with a Mayan Revival aesthetic. Their aesthetic, however, was apparently in advance of public taste. The Australia soon met with criticism; its façade was altered by others in 1920 and its interior was almost completely erased by 1938. This paper explores the Griffins' café design interventions for the 'Australia' and the concept of interior luxury.

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.[1] Similarly, the Café has yet to be considered through the lens of luxury. 'Luxury' is defined as 'sumptuous and exquisite food or surroundings'[2] Interiors that exceed necessity are thought of as luxurious made up of rare or difficult to obtain materials. 'Luxury only makes sense when it broadens emotional experience by means of a new discovery'.[3] Luxurious interiors embrace the designer's collective experiences and they demonstrate discoveries such as atmospheric effects in a designed environment. In this paper, 'interior luxury' connotes the overall atmospheric effects, such as dilating the space with light, the creation of novel alcoves comprising sensual and rare qualities of local/ imported materials, and the synthesis of indigenous themes, that nourish a design. This concept is useful when analysing the Griffins' Café Australia interior design interventions.

MELBOURNE'S CAFÉ SCENE

Late nineteenth century Melbourne was a locus for luxurious interior architecture. Cafes, 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 Grafe 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'.[4] In 1850s and 1860s, even Melbourne in the distant antipodes gained fashionable coffee houses. There, luxurious European-styled 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 Époque 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'.[5] Gold fever stricken migrants, mainly from Greece, China and the United States, flocked to Victoria's *El Dorado*. Melbourne soon grew hungry for luxury goods and luxurious buildings. Some successful fortune hunters poured their new wealth into entrepreneurial projects such as public bars, oyster saloons, cafes and shopping arcades. The city's building boom later led it to be characterised as the 'Chicago of the South'.[6] These new additions to Melbourne's burgeoning skyline were luxuriously appointed with neo-classical ornament, marble cladding and mosaics. Luxury was not confined to architecture. The fare served within the new establishments was no less luxurious. Along with coffee, luxury goods such as imported distilled spirits, ices and oysters were on offer. Emulating the conspicuous displays then fashionable in Paris and London, Melbourne became a luxurious city because of the untold wealth lining the streets. As far as Melbourne's café scene along Collins Street was concerned, the Gunsler was the primary venue for the importation of luxurious materials and the acclimatisation of novel surfaces that informed the interior.

French pastry cook, John Ferdinand Gunsler found his way to Melbourne in 1873 and would soon impact Melbourne's café scene.[7] After several years' working in Melbourne, he 'advertised for a partner' to invest '£5000' to open a new café.[8] In 1878, Gold buyer Henry George Iles answered his call, forming 'Gunsler and Co.', 'purveyors, caterers, pastry cooks and confectioners'.[9] 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 as to leave almost no room to walk between the shop front and the columns'.[10] The journal, however, did not identify the designer by name. Other features of the building attracted comment.

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'.[11] 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 Tayler (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 Cafe has on the ground floor a large restaurant, 23 x 77ft 9in x 15ft 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, 7ft 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.[12]

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 cafe's 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'.[13] 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 cafe 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'.[14] 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 'shamelessly aped the classical styles of Greece, Rome and Renaissance Italy' and it 'dripped with Palladian stucco'.[15] 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.[16] 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 cafes and restaurants. After the crash subsided, 'Australia enjoyed a boom of restaurant dining around 1890 - 1910 – the 'late Victorian and Edwardian' eras of the English and '*La Belle Époque*' of the French'.[17] 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'.[18]

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 Cafe 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'.[19] By 1931, *Australasian Home Beautiful* could distinguish the Gunsler as 'the best known café in Australia'.[20]

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.[21] Renaming it Vienna after their home city, 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'.[22] 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"'.[23] 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'.[24] 'There were no electric lights', another visitor reported, 'only gas lamps'.[25] One observer noted that the new Vienna Café served 'fish suppers [to people lounging] on plush settees'. 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'.[26] 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.[27]

When he took over the Vienna, Lucas had already met with financial success and owned two elaborate cafés nearby, the Paris (1859) and Town Hall (1894).

In 1915, Lucas purchased the Vienna outright. By then, however, the café'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 café, according to Meudell, 'had for hire a number of shabby cabinets particuliers, familiar to anybody who knows the boulevards of Paris and their purlieus, where ladies and gentlemen may meet for all kinds of lawful and unlawful occasions'.[28] Now possibly a covert brothel, the café 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 cafés and restaurants.

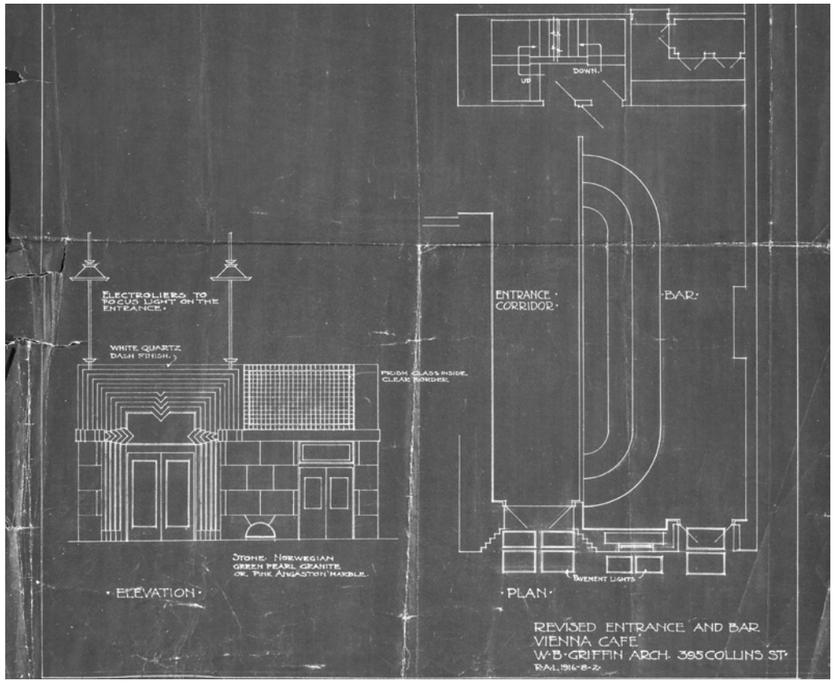
The outbreak of World War I also compelled Lucas to change the place. In 1915, a group of intoxicated soldiers staggered down Collins Street and when confronted with the name of an enemy city, they stoned the café's façade.[29] Patriotism may not have been the only motivation for the vandalism. The damage 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.[30] Whatever the cause, Lucas temporarily closed his café to erect the Griffins' design.

Along with renovating the extant café, 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'.[31] The account also noted that Nahum Barnet (1855-1931), a well-known Melbourne architect, was to design Lucas' café. 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' café was

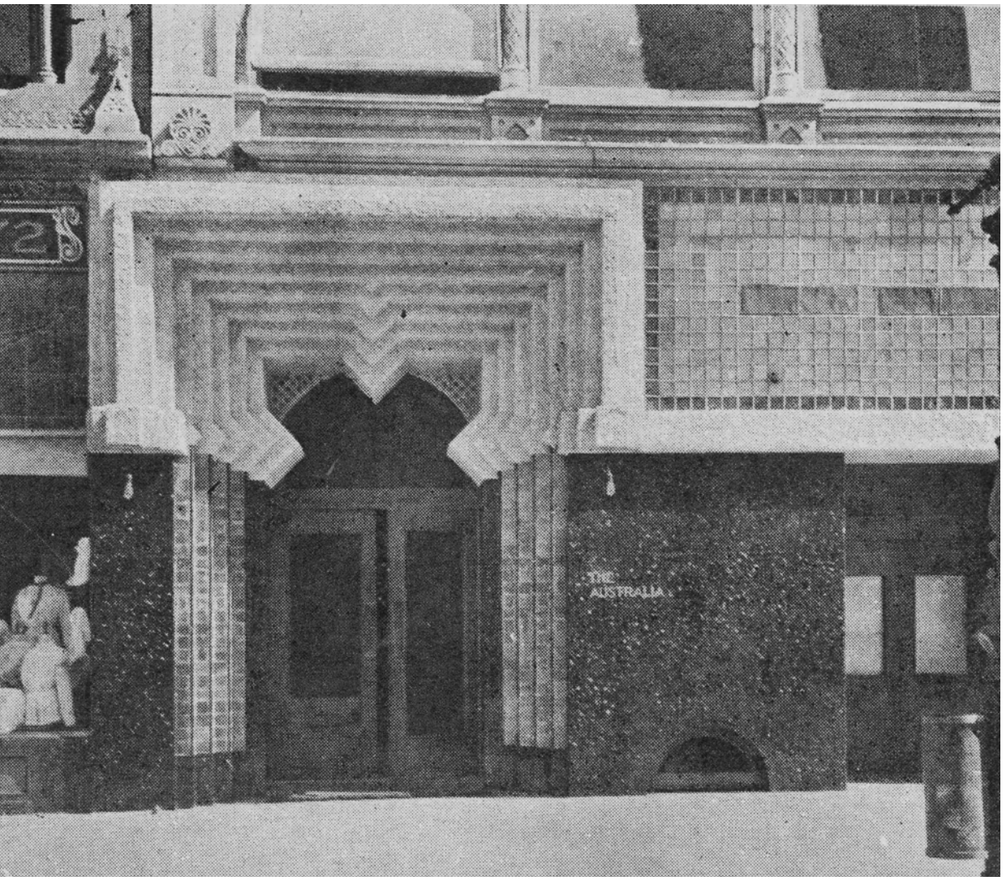
located in close proximity to Griffin's office, just a bit further up Collins Street at 395. Coffee and tea drinkers, the Griffins may even have frequented the Vienna, owing to its location convenient to their workplace. Whatever the catalyst for their contact, all three were linked as migrants, 'outsiders' to Melbourne's social circles.

REMODELLING THE 'VIENNA'

By November 1915, Lucas had contracted the Griffins to remodel and expand not only the Vienna's interior, but also its exterior façade. In a drawing dated that month, the Griffins proposed a two-storey high façade, covering Mullen'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 façade, possibly due to lack of funds. In the end, only the café's main entrance and another for the adjoining bar were constructed (Figure 1).



Above
Figure. 1. Elevation and plan of the Griffins' Vienna Cafe (1916). Source: National Library of Australia



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'.[32]

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'.[33] 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'.[34] 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'.[35] 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'.[36]

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

Opposite
Figure. 2. The 'Australia' Cafe entrance. Source: National Library of Australia

Above
Figure 3. View of the Fountain Court from the Fern Room in the Australia Café. Source: National Library of Australia

newel posts surrounded the grand staircase. The 'bizarre design,' Donald L Johnson writes, is 'a subtle translation of European Art Nouveau and the Chicago School'.[37] 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',[38] 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'.[39] The caryatid-inspired or nymph piers recall the caryatids at the Erechtheoin, 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 *Dawn 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 representation of the bush. It also conveys a longing for wider horizons of the bush-patrons

could breathe in the native verdant qualities. Bathing the Banqueting Hall with skylights in the vaulted ceiling and showering the interior with the Australia sky, at the Australia Café luxury was exposed to the setting. The environmental effects of this lofty space marked a new discovery of an Australian-type of luxury.

The entire place embraced both foreign and national styles within its many-themed rooms. The Fern Room combined both styles, Chicagoan and Australian. The Griffins enveloped the caryatid forms into their Fountain Court design because after all, their client was Greek. The grand stair in this room resembled something foreign from both Europe and Chicago. The Banqueting Hall space within the Auditorium Building Complex in particular was influential for the Griffins, but they were antithetical to Sullivan's work. Critically, Vernon suggests 'the couple abstracted a tree fern gully, a locally distinctive landscape type, and represented it in built form'.[40] Above all the entire work created an enclosure of luxury into spaces, containing 'Australian' ambiences.

EVOLUTION OF THE 'AUSTRALIA' INTERIOR

When the Vienna Cafe re-opened in 1916 as the 'Australia', a name according to Vernon was suggested by the Griffins and not Lucas, each themed-space was a spatial haven. The floors of the Fern Court (or tea salon) were lined with parquetry and furnished aptly with garden variety wicker furniture. The floors of the Fountain Court and Banqueting Hall were made out of native timber. Potted palms and ferns dotted each space. The wall and ceiling surfaces were coated with vibrant paints and flattened ornament plaster parts. The cost of the project reached £50,000.[41] The café's atmospheric effects showed the Griffins' design of the Australian blackwood chairs and tables of culinary delicacies, with coffee and tea aromas, sounds of splashing fish - a visual efflorescence of interior luxury. The crockery Marion designed herself with a fragment emanating from the entrance of the café was lavish, but one wonders if these items ever made their way to the tables inside Café Australia. 'A café then was not a café as we know it now: it was a dining establishment on a sumptuous scale'.[42]

Almost all of the advertisements published in the newspapers at the time when Café Australia opened in 1916 relay how luxurious and sumptuous it was. For example: 'and in these luxurious surroundings there is at your command a chef, cuisine, and cellar of gratifying the most exacting whim'.[43] Of course, these advertisements were placed in the paper by Lucas himself. This picture of a luxurious interior, however, remains incomplete. One way to uncover the Griffins' design interventions for the Australia Café is to draw upon the works that they had encountered in Chicago. Ironically, coffee houses were not at all popular in Chicago; there saloonkeepers and German brewers predominated until around the end of World War One. Another way is to refer to café precedents they might have visited in Europe and Australia itself. None of writings at the time, or scholarly writings, note how luxurious the bar spaces were.

Opposite
Figure 4. Banqueting Hall of the Australia Cafe. Source National Library of Australia

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 panelling as well as pavement lights. Beneath the Griffin's 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 (*aka* the 'solid rock' project) is compelling with its strong Mayan-inspired planes and flattened ornament; its façades uncannily 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 inklings detected in the Capitol Theatre and at Castelcrag. 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. The wall and ceiling surfaces in the Fountain Court were concentrations of extravagance – a swathing of ornamental plaster reliefs painted with 'pastel' colours. 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 luxuriant spaces provided clues as to how they were projected in a well-tempered Australian manner – a subdued charm, which took cues from the weak sunlight of the native landscape and lights turned on only when required. This is what made the Griffins' 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 facade 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 visited before designing the 'Australia' Café. In 1914, only around a year before they met Lucas, the Griffins made a European study tour. There they visited, amongst other places, Venice, Trieste and Vienna. Teetotallers, the couple may have called at Venice's Florian (1720 and then refurbished in 1859) and the *Caffe degli Specchi* (Café of Mirrors, 1839) at Trieste; each of these luxurious cafés was then, as now, well known. At Vienna, the Griffins possibly sought out Adolf Loos' Karntner or American Bar (1907-08), named not to commemorate the country, but to identify the then novel American cocktails it served. For the couple, of course, it was the architecture, not the drinks on offer that would have attracted. Loos' bar was luxurious owing to its cladding of exquisite black-veined marble on its exterior walls and interior coffered ceiling. As far as materiality is concerned, there are Loosian interior influences at the Australia Cafe; judging by the presence of the coffered entrance and the black granite on the Griffins' façade, but not in terms of the complex interactions of rooms.

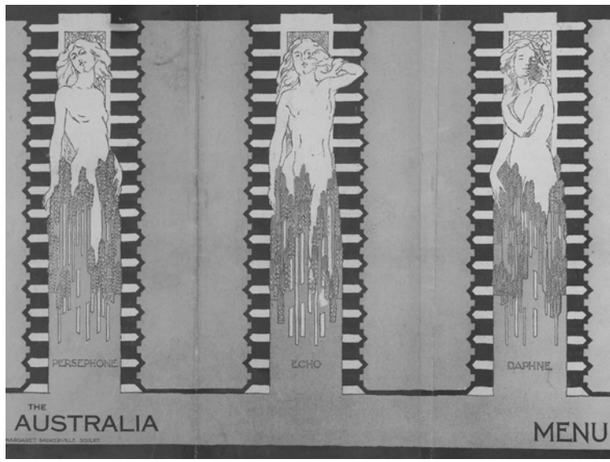
Instead, Australia Café reflected the perplexities of the sheer variability of the Australian environment. Sculptural piers in the Fountain Court were carved out of white marble. The fish basins in the Fountain Court permitted diners or drinkers to enjoy Australian scenes in tranquil spaces. The interior atmosphere of the lounge was recorded in the *Leader* as:

> Oriental in its luxuriousness and beyond come the series of colonnades eating galleries, each semi-detached from the next by a gorgeous arrangement of oxidised gold tiles flanking deep fountains of changing opalescent hues, in which gold fish dart about unmindful of the kaleidoscopic change of the water from opal to soft green or pink crimson. The pillars are more than pieces of masonry necessary to support the upper floors – they are sculptured work of art for the forest trees seem to have been petrified there.[45]

The changing effects of each space were ultimately exotic. The choice of colours and materials in Australia Café reflected the native bush and crystallised opal seams. The Griffins had an acute environmental awareness of Australia's Oriental neighbours. They were in awe of the Australian landscape, its minerals and its watercourses, and they used their own experiences to revive Lucas' extant European-inspired interior.

The 'Australia' included two modern kitchens. An extension to the back of Glen Music shop was the new section to the cafe, the part where the Banqueting Hall and kitchen were located. Lucas advertised his café in *The 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'.[46] This 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-storeys high and were 'immaculate with tile floors and walls, and equipped with the most modern culinary devices'.[47] 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 Cafe reveals a lot about the Griffins' interior ambitions. As interior designers, they created a luxuriant interior unknown to Australians and outsiders.



Above
Figure 5. Marion Mahony Griffin's design of the Australia Café menu. Source: National Library of Australia

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 consider the reconstruction of this ground floor frontage on aesthetic and architecturally correct lines before proceeding to carry the remodelling any higher'.[48] In 1920, Lucas acquiesced and altered the façade, removing, its imported Scandinavian granite blocks and prismatic glass tiles. These were replaced with a simple archway inscribed 'The Australia' (Figure 6). Lucas' façade revisions were made from an unknown architect's hand, not the Griffins'. As Lucas appreciated the Griffins' aesthetic, he must have made the changes only for fear of losing patrons. 'Mr. Lucas', the Taylors gloated in July 1920, 'has evidently found out that grotesque buildings are not a sound business asset for the bar front is now being remodelled'.[49] For the Taylors, the Griffins' brand of modernism was acceptable only behind closed doors, shielded from public view.

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 Australianised 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 riot a thousand fold, an interior that embodies 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 Gunsler's earlier murals.[50] 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 lush *café de luxe*. The Gunsler, the Vienna and Café Australia – have all been erased from 270 Collins Street. The Griffins' interior design interventions were advanced at the time. In the end, Australia Cafe's interior was accepted, but the exterior was violated. Today, Melburnians are content to sip their coffee in graffiti-filled laneways. The 'Australia' 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.

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 Birrell, J. *Walter Burley Griffin*. (University of Queensland Press, 1964); Donald Johnson, *The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin* (Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1977); Jeff Turnbull and Peter Y. Navaretti (eds.), *The Griffins in Australia and India: The Complete Works and Projects of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 1998); Christopher Vernon, "'The Silence of the Mountains and the Music of the Sea": The Landscape Artistry of Marion Mahony Griffin.' *Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature*. D. Wood, ed. Illinois: The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art (Northwestern University Press, 2005); and Alasdair McGregor, *Grand Obsessions: the Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (Victoria: Lantern, Penguin Group, 2009).
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17 Symons, *One Continuous Picnic: A Gastronomic History of Australia*, 133.
18 M. Lewis, "'The Most Luxuriously Furnished Salon in Melbourne'", 77.
19 R. G. Meudell, *The Pleasant Career of a Spendthrift and His Later Reflections* (1929), 285.
20 *Australasian Home Beautiful,* c.1916.
21 *The Argus,* 5 June 1889.
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23 Berstein, *Hotel Australia*, 63.
24 Meudell, *The Pleasant Career*, 286.
25 Berstein, 63.
26 Berstein, 25.
27 J. Smith (ed.), *Cyclopaedia of Victoria* (Melbourne: Cyclopedia Company, 1905), 158.
28 Meudell, *The Pleasant Career of a Spendthrift*, 286-287.
29 See McGregor, A. *Grand Obsessions: the Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (2009), 257-8.
30 Symons, 133.
31 *The Argus,* 2 June 1915, 16.
32 A. McGregor, *Grand Obsessions: the Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin,* 2009, 259. Also, see Kristin Otto, *Capital: Melbourne When it Was the Capital City of Australia* 1901-27 (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company), 2009.
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50 Robyn Annear, *A City Lost and Found,* 96.

Opposite
Figure 6. Collage of the Australia Cafe in 270 Collins Street, demonstrating its 1920 alteration. Author: A. Condello.