

Colonisation and Its Impacts on Melbourne: A Historical Perspective on Urban Development

Yuchen Luan ^{1,a,*}

¹*Melbourne School of Design, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia*
a.yucluan@student.unimelb.edu.au

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Prior to the World Wars, European and American empires implemented a colonial model of urban planning in the colonies and concessions under their control. This approach to urban planning was characterised by an imperialist ideology that sought to impose Western standards and values on the territories they governed. This essay explores the manifestation and impact of colonisation on Melbourne, Australia, from its establishment as a British settlement in 1835 to the present day. The essay focuses on the city's colonial background, the manifestation of colonisation in urban development through urban planning and landmark buildings, and the impact of colonisation on living habits, social structures, and cultural traditions. Melbourne's colonial history is marked by the displacement and subjugation of indigenous peoples and the exploitation of natural resources for British economic gain. The enduring influence of colonialism is evident in the urban planning, architectural landmarks, and cultural practices of Melbourne city, and has left an indelible mark on its urban, social, and economic development. The legacy of colonialism is reflected in the enduring patterns of power, inequality, and exclusion that are embedded in the city's physical and social landscape. This legacy has also contributed to the persistence of cultural and social hierarchies, which continue to shape the city's urban fabric and its social and economic relations. Furthermore, the effects of colonialism can be observed in the city's built environment, including its urban morphology, architectural styles, and land use patterns, all of which reflect the values and ideologies of the colonial era.

Keywords: colonisation, urban development, Melbourne

1. Introduction

In retrospect, the history of colonisation presents a paradoxical situation, in which positive and negative impacts coexist. Colonising powers imposed their political and economic systems upon their colonies, often leading to the oppression and exploitation of colonised peoples, resulting in poverty, injustice, and inequality that still prevail today. In Africa, for instance, colonial powers took over local resources, impeding economic development and imposing policies of apartheid and racial discrimination, damaging social and cultural structures. These negative effects of colonisation will continue to impact local populations for generations to come.

Despite the negative effects, it is undeniable that colonisation has also contributed to rapid development in many countries. Although colonisation has left tragic memories for many countries and cities, it has also had a positive impact on their social development. Melbourne's colonial history

is marked by the displacement and subjugation of indigenous peoples and the exploitation of natural resources for British economic gain. Colonisation's legacy has had both positive and negative impacts on the city's development. This essay focuses on the impacts of colonisation on Melbourne, examines Melbourne's colonial background, the manifestation of colonisation in urban development through urban planning and landmark buildings, and analyses the impact of colonisation on living habits, social structures, and cultural traditions.

2. Colonial Background

Melbourne, a British settlement founded in 1835, was established on the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. The city's colonial history is characterised by the displacement and subjugation of indigenous peoples, as well as the exploitation of natural resources for British economic gain. John Batman, a Tasmanian grazier and entrepreneur, negotiated a treaty with the local indigenous people for the acquisition of land, but the British government later declared the treaty invalid and claimed the land as Crown land. The British recognized the potential for settlement and expansion in the area and established the Colony of Victoria in 1836, with Melbourne serving as its capital. The colony was established with the aim of promoting trade, commerce, and agriculture, and the British sought to exploit the region's natural resources, particularly wool and gold. The arrival of the first fleet of settlers brought significant changes to the region's social, political, and economic landscape. Indigenous peoples were forcibly displaced from their lands and often compelled to work as labourers on pastoral properties. The introduction of sheep farming and agriculture had a significant impact on the region's natural environment [1].

Melbourne's exceptional expansion in the mid-19th century was primarily fueled by the gold rush that began in 1851. The discovery of gold attracted a massive wave of migrants to the region, including a significant number of Chinese immigrants. The sudden surge of people and capital transformed Melbourne from a small colonial outpost into a bustling metropolis of commerce and industry, consolidating its position as Victoria's dominant economic force [2]. The gold rush had a profound impact on Melbourne's economic, social, and political landscape. The rapid increase in population created an unprecedented demand for infrastructure, such as housing, hospitals, schools, and transportation systems. The influx of migrants also fostered the growth of various industries, including mining, manufacturing, and agriculture, leading to increased trade and investment in the region [3]. Melbourne's urban planning, landmark architecture, and cultural traditions all serve as compelling evidence of its colonial heritage.

3. The Manifestation of Colonisation in Urban Development

3.1. Urban Planning

The legacy of this history can still be seen in Melbourne's urban planning, which was heavily influenced by British colonialism. The city's central grid layout, with wide streets and public parks, was modelled after London's urban design. Many of Melbourne's landmark buildings, such as the Royal Exhibition Building and the State Library of Victoria, were constructed during the late 19th century when the city experienced a period of economic prosperity due to gold mining.

The central grid layout, also known as Hoddle grid, was designed by Robert Hoddle in 1837, and included a comprehensive plan for the road network and the division of blocks. The network comprised five east-west and nine north-south roads, creating a checkerboard pattern of rectangular blocks. The Hoddle grid is not just an urban planning innovation but also a physical embodiment of colonialism in Melbourne. As a product of the colonial era, the Hoddle grid reflects the city's history of British settlement and its economic and political motives [4]. The Hoddle grid was a means for the colonial government to subdivide land into small, sellable blocks to generate revenue while also

concentrating people and wealth in the centre of Melbourne, promoting the city's growth and the region's economy.

The Hoddle grid's legacy endures to this day and remains a vital element of Melbourne's urban fabric. However, it is also a reminder of the city's colonial past and shows the social, economic, and environmental impacts of colonisation. The Hoddle grid, representing the inception of a new town, has witnessed Melbourne's transformation over the past 180 years [5]. Today, this area remains the heart of Melbourne, with the Hoddle grid showcasing a blend of traditional and modern architecture. The Melbourne Exclusive shopping mall and the bustling Queen Victoria Market, alongside historic landmarks dating back centuries, coexist with modern office towers. The Hoddle grid in Melbourne's central business district is widely recognized as an exemplary model of early urban planning that established the foundation for Melbourne's rise as a major city and economic centre. The Hoddle grid continues to influence Melbourne's urban planning and design today, with many new developments seeking to maintain the original grid pattern while meeting contemporary urban needs.

3.2. Landmark Buildings

Not only Hoddle grid is a tangible representation of Melbourne's colonial history, but landmark buildings also serve as a clear reflection of British settlement and colonialism. During the colonial era, Melbourne underwent a period of rapid growth, leading to the construction of various landmark buildings that became symbols of power, wealth, and cultural influence.

These buildings were constructed with a clear colonial agenda, serving as monuments to the economic, political, and social dominance of the British Empire in Melbourne. For example, the Royal Exhibition Building, completed in 1880, was intended to showcase Melbourne's wealth and progress while asserting the British Empire's cultural and technological superiority. Similarly, the Melbourne Town Hall, completed in 1870, served as a venue for civic events but also reflected the city's aspirations for sophistication and refinement that were synonymous with British culture.

In addition to their architectural significance, these landmark buildings also have cultural and historical significance for Melbourne. For instance, the Flinders Street Station, built in 1910, is a major transportation hub and one of Melbourne's most iconic structures, representing a fusion of Victorian architecture and industrial design [6]. The State Library of Victoria, built in the mid-19th century, is a significant cultural institution, holding a vast collection of books, manuscripts, and archives that document Melbourne's colonial past and contemporary society. The Shrine of Remembrance, built in the 1920s, is a prominent war memorial that serves as a tribute to the Australian soldiers who died in World War I and later conflicts, and it embodies the country's national identity and values [7].

These landmark buildings also reflect the cultural influences of different ethnic groups that have contributed to Melbourne's development. For example, the St. Paul's Cathedral, completed in the 1890s, is a striking example of Gothic Revival architecture and reflects the dominant religious traditions of the British Empire. In contrast, the Chinese Museum, established in 1985, documents the history and culture of Chinese immigrants in Australia and showcases Chinese art, artefacts, and customs [8]. Similarly, the Islamic Museum of Australia, opened in 2014, is a museum that celebrates the contributions of Muslim Australians to the country's social, cultural, and economic life.

These landmark buildings remain prominent features of Melbourne's urban landscape, attracting tourists and locals alike. However, they are also reminders of the city's colonial past and the legacies of social inequality and exclusion inherent in colonialism. While they represent significant architectural achievements, they also embody a history of exploitation, dispossession, and marginalisation that continues to impact contemporary Australia.

4. The Impacts of Colonisation

4.1. Impacts on Living Habits

Colonialism has left a significant imprint on Melbourne, manifesting in its physical landscape, social, economic, and cultural spheres. The legacy of British settlement and colonisation is evident in many facets of the city, with lasting impacts on its urban planning, architecture, and community development. One noteworthy outcome of colonisation is the displacement of indigenous people from central Melbourne to peripheral areas, resulting in the current suburbanization pattern. This historical phenomenon illuminates the negative social impacts of colonial urbanisation, including creating a segregated cityscape that exacerbates social inequality [9].

One area where the impact of colonisation is palpable is in Melbourne's residential neighbourhoods. During the colonial period, residential areas were developed to accommodate the growing influx of settlers and immigrants. Segregation by race and class was common, resulting in wealthier settlers inhabiting affluent suburbs while working-class immigrants were relegated to poorer neighbourhoods. This legacy of segregation still influences Melbourne's housing market today, where property prices and rental rates are typically higher in affluent areas and more affordable in less privileged areas. This housing disparity perpetuates social exclusion and marginalisation, making it challenging for some residents to access essential services and amenities.

4.2. Impact on Culture

The cultural traditions of Melbourne also reflect its colonial past. British settlers brought their traditions, such as cricket and football, which remain popular today. The imposition of British cultural norms and values through architecture, institutions, and urban space led to the erasure of indigenous culture and the creation of a monoculture. This has had long-term implications for the city's identity and cultural diversity. The city's museums and galleries showcase the works of British and European artists, reflecting the influence of Western culture on Melbourne's art scene.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the contributions of various immigrant communities have also enriched Melbourne's cultural landscape. For instance, the city's Italy neighbourhood in Carlton and the Chinese district in Chinatown are examples of how immigrants have created their own unique spaces within the city, preserving their cultural traditions and adding to Melbourne's diversity.

Furthermore, colonisation has profoundly impacted Melbourne's indigenous culture, which has faced immense challenges to its survival and preservation. The indigenous people were driven from their land and forced to assimilate, eroding their cultural practices and beliefs and leading to the marginalisation of indigenous communities. As a result, Melbourne has been working towards greater recognition and support for indigenous culture, including implementing indigenous language programs and establishing cultural centres and festivals [10].

The legacy of colonisation in Melbourne has both positive and negative impacts on the city's residential neighbourhoods and cultural landscape. While it has contributed to the creation of diverse and vibrant neighbourhoods through immigration, it has also caused social inequality and threatened the survival of indigenous culture.

4.3. Impact on the Economy

The impact of colonisation on Melbourne's economy is a complex and multifaceted issue. British settlement and colonialism laid the foundation for Melbourne's economic growth and development. The establishment of a British colony in Victoria in 1835 led to an influx of immigrants and settlers, which fueled the growth of Melbourne's economy.

One of the key drivers of Melbourne's early economy was the gold rush of the 1850s. The discovery of gold in Victoria attracted tens of thousands of prospectors worldwide, leading to a surge in economic activity. This influx of people and capital helped to transform Melbourne from a small colonial outpost into a bustling commercial hub. The legacy of colonialism can also be seen in Melbourne's infrastructure, which was developed to support the city's economic growth. The construction of the Melbourne harbour and railway network helped to facilitate the movement of goods and people around the city and beyond, and also a testament to the city's economic prosperity [11].

Furthermore, The earlier development as a colonial capital led to the establishment of many commercial and landmark buildings in the city centre to cater to commercial activity, emphasising symbolism and political influence. The establishment of Melbourne as the capital of Australia in the 19th century facilitated the growth of a strong economy driven by trade and commerce. This period saw many commercial buildings, such as banks, warehouses, and offices, built to cater to the growing demand for goods and services. This led to a dense urban core in Melbourne, characterised by a high concentration of commercial buildings and activities.

However, the benefits of Melbourne's early economic growth were not shared equally. The British government's establishment of the administrative centre in Melbourne also brought with it colonial cultural values and ideas that caused significant damage and harm to the land and way of life of the Indigenous peoples. Policies and practices at the time discriminated against, excluded, deprived, and persecuted Indigenous peoples, threatening their rights and survival. The exploitation of indigenous peoples and the use of convict labour were key factors in the early development of Melbourne's economy. Indigenous peoples were displaced from their traditional lands and forced to work as labourers, while convicts were used to building much of the city's infrastructure. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small group of elites led to significant social and economic inequality. The legacy of this inequality can still be seen in Melbourne today, with high levels of income inequality and disparities in access to education, healthcare, and other essential services.

It is not just the impact on the Aboriginal people, but Melbourne's environmental and social problems have been exposed by the urban development brought about by colonisation. Overdevelopment and resource use during urbanisation led to the destruction of natural ecosystems and aggravated environmental pollution. At the same time, urbanisation also brought about social problems such as poverty, crime, and inequality.

Colonialism laid the foundation for Melbourne's economic growth and development, but it also negatively impacted the environment, indigenous peoples and contributed to social and economic inequality.

5. Conclusion

This essay introduces Melbourne's colonial background and the manifestation of colonisation in urban development through urban planning and landmark buildings, and analyses the impact of colonisation on living habits, social structures, and cultural traditions.

Melbourne's rich history can be traced back to 1835 when British colonists entered into an agreement with the local Indigenous peoples for the acquisition of land for the establishment of a new settlement. This agreement resulted in the dispossession and displacement of the Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, which led to the loss of their way of life, culture, and traditions. As the settlement grew, the British colonists exploited the area's natural resources, particularly the abundant gold and wool, primarily for the benefit of the British economy and to advance their interests in the region. Despite its problematic origins, Melbourne eventually evolved into a colony of Victoria and emerged as a significant city in Australia. Presently, the city has flourished into a vibrant and multicultural hub of art, culture, and commerce, attracting visitors around the world.

The impact of colonisation in Melbourne, Australia has been both multifaceted and complex, encompassing both positive and negative effects. The city's colonial history is marked by the displacement and subjugation of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of natural resources for British economic gain. This legacy is visible in the city's urban planning, including the Hoddle grid, which reflects the city's history of British settlement and its economic and political motives. Although the Hoddle grid continues to be a vital element of Melbourne's urban fabric, it is also a reminder of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of colonisation.

The legacy of colonisation has had far-reaching effects on the city's urban, social, and economic development, with both positive and negative effects still evident today. On the one hand, colonisation was responsible for the rapid development of many countries, including Australia, which was transformed from an underpopulated and relatively isolated continent to a prosperous nation with a vibrant culture and diverse society. On the other hand, the colonisation process resulted in poverty, injustice, and inequality, particularly for Indigenous peoples, whom the ongoing effects of colonisation have disproportionately impacted.

As such, it is crucial to critically reflect on the historical impact of colonisation and its ongoing effects on societies worldwide. By acknowledging and addressing the negative impacts of colonisation, we can work towards promoting social justice, equality, and inclusivity. This includes recognizing the rights and contributions of Indigenous peoples, promoting cultural diversity and understanding, and supporting initiatives that empower marginalised communities. Decolonization requires a concerted effort to deconstruct systems of power and privilege that have perpetuated social, economic, and environmental injustices in the aftermath of colonisation.

References

- [1] Macintyre, Stuart. *A history for a nation: Ernest Scott and the making of Australian history*. Melbourne Univ. Publishing, 2016.
- [2] Lesh, James. *Cremorne Gardens, gold-rush Melbourne, and the Victorian-era pleasure Garden, 1853-63*. *Victorian Historical Journal* 90, no. 2 (2019): 219-252.
- [3] McCalman, Janet. *Vandemonians: The Repressed History of Colonial Victoria*. Melbourne Univ. Publishing, 2021.
- [4] Webber, Monique. *Imperial power dialogues in Melbourne's streets*. *agora* 56, no. 3 (2021): 43-48.
- [5] Nicholson, Mandy, and David Jones. *Wurundjeri-al Narrm-u (Wurundjeri's Melbourne): Aboriginal living heritage in Australia's urban landscapes*. In *The Routledge Handbook on Historic Urban Landscapes in the Asia-Pacific*, pp. 508-525. Routledge, 2019.
- [6] Day, Kirsten, and Peter Raisbeck. *The Last Laugh and Its Afterlife: Emerging Narratives in 1970s Melbourne Architecture*. *Fabrications* 31, no. 3 (2021): 336-356.
- [7] Sima, Yina. *An enquiry into the urban design process in Melbourne CBD, Australia*. 19, no. 2 (2019): 100-109.
- [8] Geng, Shiran, Hing-Wah Chau, Elmira Jamei, and Zora Vrcelj. *Understanding the Street Layout of Melbourne's Chinatown as an Urban Heritage Precinct in a Grid System Using Space Syntax Methods and Field Observation*. *Sustainability* 14, no. 19 (2022): 12701.
- [9] Davison, Graeme, ed. *The Outcasts of Melbourne: Essays in Social History*. Routledge, 2020.
- [10] Colleoni, Paola. *A Gothic Vision: James Goold, William Wardell and the Building of St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, 1850-97*. *Architectural History* 65 (2022): 227-260.
- [11] Chapman, Valerie, ed. *Terrible hard biscuits: a reader in Aboriginal history*. Routledge, 2020.