The Sydney General Post Office: A Metaphor for Australian Federation

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The architecture of the Sydney General Post Office, completed from 1864 to 1891, captures the spirit of the Australian populace in the period preceding Federation. By the time the carvings on the Pitt Street façade were commenced, Sydney had hosted an international exhibition and become a world city; and an emerging urban ethos of pride in the city was encouraging widespread interest in further development. The controversial carvings reflected this changing temper. The completion of the clock tower in 1891 marked a new stage in the life of the city. The physical form of the metropolis had nurtured the ideals and aspirations of society and now provided a platform for nation building. The remarkable clock tower was used as a metaphor for Federation in a poem by the Federalist, Robert Garran. Australian Federation, claims John Hirst in "The Sentimental Nation, was a people’s movement and an outcome of national sentiment. This paper is the first to identify how the grand architecture of the General Post Office helped people to imagine themselves as part of a larger national and international community.

In 1879 the British colony of New South Wales hosted the first international exhibition in the Southern Hemisphere. Never before had an international exhibition been held so far from the cultural and commercial centres of Europe. Exhibits and visitors from all the great nations of the world made the daunting sea journey to the remote and little-known colony that, less than forty years ago, had been the destination mainly of convicts and their keepers. The Sydney International Exhibition was immediately followed by the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880 in the colony of Victoria and the success of these exhibitions inspired the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, held in 1888 to celebrate the centenary of white settlement in Australia. These international exhibitions had a profound impact on Australia that lasted through to Federation and beyond. They gave rise to a shared sentiment or ethos, provided opportunities for colonial independence, intercolonial cooperation and imperial alliance, and were an impetus for colonial developments that made Federation possible. Moreover, they placed a new emphasis on the city – on Australian urban culture – which stimulated urban growth and created the conditions that enabled people to imagine a nation.¹

John Hirst argues that Australian Federation was a people’s movement and an outcome of widely shared national sentiment.² However, ethos and sentiment can be difficult to gauge because they are subjective concepts existing in the mind. We can only infer how the ordinary, private person is thinking through sentiments expressed in more tangible forms. Hirst turns to poetry to capture the sentiment existing in late-nineteenth-century colonial society.³ His exploration of poetry gives valuable insights into the desires and strivings of the people as they reflected on their achievements, their identity and their economic and political future. Another medium through which sentiment can be expressed is the physical form of the built environment. Indeed, the study of the material progress and changing character of Australian cities reveals a picture of emerging sentiments of Australian national identity.
The Sydney General Post Office, completed in the aftermath of the Sydney International Exhibition, is an architectural expression of nineteenth-century national sentiment. Its monumentality, in turn, inspired patriotic poetry. Bringing architecture and poetry together in this way, the Post Office thus physically and spiritually symbolises Australian aspirations for nationhood. This paper explores how its grand architectural language encapsulated the achievements and ambitions of the people of Sydney as they began to imagine themselves as part of a larger national and international community moving towards Federation.

The Post Office Tower as a Metaphor for the Federation Movement

The Sydney General Post Office was commissioned in 1862 to accommodate the postal and telegraphic services that linked New South Wales to the rest of the world. Completed over three decades to the design of Colonial Architect James Barnet, it was conceived as the colony’s ‘centre and focus, the heart … from which the pulse of civilisation throbs to the remotest extremity of the land’.4

The Post Office’s final, crowning glory was its tower – about seven storeys high, the tallest structure in the city, and visible for miles. Delayed by the sheer expense of construction, its completion in 1891 was widely celebrated. Robert Garran (1867-1957), who was later to become better known for his part in the Australian Federation movement and as the Commonwealth Solicitor-General, marked the occasion with a poem, The Post Office Bells:

Ring forth, ye bells, begin to chime;
Ring in the right, ring out the wrong;
We’ve waited patiently and long,
Ring, welcome bells, it’s nearly time.

(8 stanzas have been omitted)

Ring out disunion; jealous blood
That fetters young Australia’s might;
Ring out provincial petty spite;
Ring in a broader brotherhood.

Ring, mighty bells; make up lost time;
Ring all the changes that you know.
We want more changes here, I trow,
Than you can give; begin to chime.

Ring night and day, with clarion clang;
Ring in the good; ring out the ill;
But don’t, as some folk say you will,
Ring down the tower in which you hang.5

My interpretation of this poem is that it is more than a celebration of the clock tower – it has a deeper meaning as a metaphor for the Federation movement.

At the time of the poem’s publication, Robert was only twenty-four and still lived with his parents. His father, Andrew, was long-time editor of The Sydney Morning Herald, politically liberal, a believer in the necessity of an educated democracy, and an energetic federalist. Robert Garran had received a top classical education at Sydney Grammar and the University of Sydney, and was so committed to Australian nationhood that he later became a Council member of the Australasian Federation League and attended the 1893 Corowa Conference that rescued the Federation movement from the impasse which followed the 1891 Constitutional Convention.6

The first stanza of Garran’s poem refers to the extraordinarily long period it took for the tower to be completed – for although the stonework had been laid in September 1885, it was a further six years before the clock and bells were installed. The last stanza refers to some controversial claims that the
weight of the bells might cause the tower to collapse – a prediction that James Barnet dismissed as ‘ridiculous’. In between the opening and closing stanzas, much of the poem appears to be a general tirade against politicians and the conduct of the New South Wales Parliament, linked by the theme of the post office bells ringing in change. But there is more to Garran’s poem than this.

Because Garran was an accomplished scholar of literature and the classics he skilfully incorporated the sophisticated literary device of allusion in his poem to convey another meaning: I am convinced that he is writing about Federation. The first Constitutional Convention had been held three months earlier, producing a draft Constitution that Garran would later comment allowed the dream of Federation to come ‘down from the clouds to the earth’ and become a real possibility. In the opening stanza, the bells that ‘begin to chime’ are the delegates from each of the Australian colonies and New Zealand – men like Alfred Deakin, Henry Parkes, Samuel Griffith, Andrew Inglis Clark, Charles Kingston and Edmund Barton – who came together at the Convention and produced the draft Constitution, ringing in ‘the right’ of a ‘broader brotherhood’ and Australian nationhood and ringing out ‘the wrong’ of colonial rivalry and imperial dependence. ‘It’s nearly time,’ says Garran. ‘Time for what,’ I ask? It’s time for Federation.

By the second-last stanza, Garran acknowledges that ‘We want more changes here … than you [the bells] can give’. Garran could see that politicians alone would not achieve Federation and that it would only come about when committed federalists and ordinary people alike shared the ideal of nationhood.

The last stanza refers to the loss of momentum suffered by the Federation movement after the Convention, when the effects of an earlier maritime strike (August 1890) became apparent in a nationally depressed economy and low social morale. Garran was caught up in these circumstances because his father had been appointed to preside over the Royal Commission on Strikes, convened in its aftermath. Garran was deeply disturbed by the clash between labour and capital, worried that the very delegates who had done the most to advance the Federation movement at the Constitutional Convention – Premiers Deakin in Victoria, Parkes in New South Wales, and Griffith in Queensland – were also putting it at risk in their determination to maintain law and order and to preserve the right of employers to hire non-union labour.

He exhorts the ‘welcome bells’, or the delegates, to ‘ring night and day, with clarion clang’ the Federation ideal. He implores the bells not to ‘ring down the tower in which you hang’, referring literally to the weight of the bells which threatened to damage the tower, and metaphorically to the heavy-handed approach of the politicians against the workers which threatened to bring down Federation. Two years after this poem was written, the Corowa Conference enshrined the principle of popular involvement in the Federation process. In contrast to Canada where Federation had been achieved by politicians behind closed doors, Australian Federation was achieved through the will of the populace and not just the politicians.

The poem’s references to Federation may not be obvious to today’s reader. Peter Bridges and Robin Appleton, for example, cite the poem in their history of the General Post Office, without commenting on the poem’s subject matter. But the allusions to Federation would immediately have been clear to educated, politically aware readers in 1891.

Celebratory Poems and the Advancement of Noble Causes

Garran’s poem stems from a poetic tradition that had been growing since the earliest days of Australian colonial settlement. The colonial poets thought of themselves as cultural missionaries – even catalysts – for creating in a rude environment a civilisation based on classical principles. It was poetry’s sacred purpose to convey ideals, enlighten man and inspire him to greater things: the true and the good. Poetry and prose were produced in prodigious quantities and published in small newspapers for the gratification of a wide readership. Radical poets addressed local socio-political agendas of the day, espoused liberal and democratic principles, and dreamed of a new society, free from the ills of the Old World, flourishing in the unique and harsh land that they, and the men and women before them, had pioneered. For poets, buildings were celebrated as tangible representations of civilisation, progress and cultural sophistication. In particular the magnificent
international exhibition buildings in Sydney and Melbourne, and the events they accommodated, symbolised a bright future for the nation.

There was a chorus of nationalist sentiment in the poetry produced to celebrate the Australian international exhibitions in Sydney (1879) and Melbourne (1880 and 1888). These were major cultural events that brought the people together in a shared experience. In line with classical tastes, the appropriate mode of celebration was considered to be in the Homeric tradition of epic poetry accompanied by elevating music. Innumerable poems heralded the openings and farewelled the closings; oratorios and cantatas, with prayers of thanksgiving, were performed beneath the soaring ecclesiastical domes of the exhibition buildings to exalt these celebrations in quasi-sacred ceremonies.12

One of the long-significant colonial poets, Henry Halloran (1811-1893), was a firm believer in the sacred mission of poetry and wrote epics to celebrate the opening and closing of the international exhibitions of 1879 and 1880. In the poem In Memoriam: On Closing the New South Wales International Exhibition of 1879, written in April 1880, Halloran likens the Sydney International Exhibition to a supernatural phenomenon or heaven-sent message – a ‘Vision’ – that has awoken the Australian people from their slumber and fills ‘hearts with pleasing hope that thou may’st prove the Horoscope of our Great Future bright and just’.13 The Garden Palace exhibition building assumes symbolic meaning as a heavenly temple that uplifts the soul, connecting its communicant with God. It symbolises the noble and sacred ideals that inspired the exhibition and which now need to be directed towards the higher cause of nationhood.

A higher Palace must we find
Which shines with other lights than these,
With other forms and harmonies,
Which other graces blend and bind

That Palace stands beyond the Sun,
Its pathways are not soiled with dust; –
There dwell The Pure, there dwell The Just,
His will in Earth and Heaven be done. …

Bright Palace shalt thou stand
Altho’ thy light has fled; –
Thy fame throughout the Land
Shall brightly widely spread,
And coming time command, –
Altho’ thy light has fled.14

Almost a year to the day after he penned this poem, Halloran turned his attention to Victoria and wrote another, In Memoriam: On Closing the Victoria International Exhibition, 1880, in which the vision of nationhood is more clearly articulated. The Melbourne International Exhibition has gathered the people together in democratic spirit and is seen as an acorn from which the mighty oak will grow: it is the seed of Federation. Halloran extrapolates from the success of the exhibitions to visions of a glorious future, convinced that there is a force of destiny – of which the exhibitions are a manifestation – carrying Australia towards Federation.

Dim eyes that look beyond the light,
May find within the dreamy haze,
The outline of far-coming days, –
As Seers see, and Poets write.

The voice of Millions gathering near;
The perfect rule of earnest men; –
The rule of Sword – the rule of Pen,
And ‘Demos,’ ‘Demos’ shouted clear!

And in the higher minds that sway;
And in the manly hearts that toil
To win from life its highest spoil,
Will be the harvest of to-day.

The impress which we grave on steel,
Of Truth and Freedom, Grace and Power,
The faithful reflex of the hour,
Will mould a mighty Commonweal. 15

A decade later, when Garran penned his post office poem, poetry was again proving the most appropriate medium to express the rationale and purposes of the ‘sacred cause’ of Australian Federation. A recent critique on the function of poetry by George Szirtes in The Sydney Morning Herald observes that ‘The subject of poetry being life, and politics being a part of life, poets have written as they thought or might have voted.’ 16 Through poetry, Hirst is able to trace the evolution of the Federation movement and demonstrate changing national sentiments. Poets could unreservedly promote and pursue a purely idealistic cause unencumbered by the practicalities of its realisation. Hirst asserts that ‘the nation was born in a festival of poetry’. 17

Buildings as Symbols of National Identity

Another medium through which sentiment can be expressed is the built environment. Walter Firey contends that economic analysis cannot fully explain all aspects of urban spatial structure and dynamics and suggests that at times sentiment and symbolism are also significant forces in the spatial development process. Buildings, city layout, and architectural styles embody the ideals, customs, and institutions of the people. 18 Robert Bevan’s recent book, The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War, identifies architecture as having powerfully symbolic – even totemic – qualities. 19 For example, churches, libraries and art galleries do not simply accommodate important public functions, but represent the community and its cultural values and heritage. 20 The loss of such buildings can destabilise a society and erase memories, history and identity.

Since earliest times, Australian colonial elites had believed the state of their towns and cities to be a reflection of the stage of civilisation attained by the people. They deliberately promoted urban development in an effort to advance the society, shape its character and engender Old World values. 21 By the second half of the nineteenth century, the concentration of the population in a few large cities was widely recognised as a positive feature of colonial society and Australian commissioners and exhibitors at international exhibitions overseas exploited images of the cities in an aggressive campaign to attract a better class of immigrant and increase opportunities for trade and investment. 22 Photographs, accompanied by statistical information and maps explaining their geographical locations, made the unfamiliar and distant colonies visually comprehensible. They placed the cities within the broad sweep of national culture and it became common for international audiences to draw conclusions about the Australian colonies based on an assessment of their capital cities. 23

When the international exhibitions came to Australia, the cities were on display for international consumption. More importantly, for the first time, the organising elites had an opportunity to promote the city to their own people through the urban focus of the exhibition event. 24 Looking down from the top of the exhibition buildings people saw their city laid out before them. The great height lent a new aspect to everything as the familiar became unfamiliar. What might have felt small and provincial at street level, suddenly revealed attributes that most had not appreciated before. 25 Not in Vienna, not in London, not in Philadelphia, not in Paris could a view be found comparable to that which might be had in a few minutes from any one of the towers of the Garden Palace. 26
In Sydney, people were startled to see laid out below them a city of such metropolitan proportions set in a landscape of such dazzling natural beauty. The contrast between the humanised urbscape and the untouched areas of bushland and harbour underlined the progress made in less than a century of European settlement. Great pleasure was taken in seeing how English the city looked from above with its pretty church towers and conspicuous public buildings that define all great cities, such as the town hall, university, and museum. The pretty residences of the suburban areas were testimony to the moral fibre and civilised values of the colony’s citizens. There were to be seen some suburbs displaying industrial activity with sheds and factory buildings and the occasional district of ill repute, such as lower portions of Woolloomooloo; but, unlike the old-world cities, there were not the slum areas or blackened industrial parts from which to avert one’s eyes. Sweeping the full three hundred and sixty degrees, from the shore where Captain Cook had landed, to the ‘Rocks’ where Old Sydney had been established – but which now looked like a toy village compared to the modern city surrounding it – the eye could appreciate the colony’s development. The old Exhibition Building in Prince Alfred Park, looking ‘excessively shabby compared with its international rival,’ and the old graveyards of Devonshire Street symbolised how far the colony had progressed from a colonial outpost to world city. Such exhibition experiences contributed to identification with the city and long-standing colonial aspirations became linked to urban development. For instance, Australians could see that their desire for a strong imperial alliance in which they were more equal partners with Britain demanded the backing of the political, economic and cultural structures which urbanisation could provide. Economically, they understood that while the land promised wealth for toil, its yields were worthless without cities fully sufficient to meet the demands of the shipping and export trade and associated commercial activities. Culturally, no one wanted a cultural life to be founded on notions of primitive, wild, frontier values and they recognised the civilising influences of city-based institutions. Thus pride in the city became a part of the national identity of a progressive and innovative people.

The Post Office Tower as a Marker of Place, Time and Ethos

When the post office tower was completed in 1891 it became the dominant city landmark. Australia had just celebrated one hundred years of European settlement, the fin de siècle was approaching and people were debating their future: one that might involve imperial independence, colonial unity and a distinctive identity.

The enhancements to the General Post Office that made it a grand edifice and symbol of national identity for Sydneysiders – the carvings on the façade and the clock tower –began around the time that the magnificent Garden Palace burned down. The Garden Palace had been built for the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879 and was one of the most ambitious buildings ever to be undertaken in the colonies. Its pièce de résistance was the marvellous dome – constructed entirely of timber and lit by clerestory windows at its base – that was not only the largest in the Southern Hemisphere, but ranked sixth in the world for size. Rising assertively above the Botanic Gardens and harbour, the Garden Palace became an instant landmark that symbolised the colony’s progress and emergence on the world stage. Souvenir views of Sydney, which from the earliest days had been taken looking east over the Harbour towards the Heads, now turned around to gaze from Bradley’s Head and Mrs Macquarie’s Chair to the urban centre, with the Palace in the foreground. The Illustrated Sydney News launched a new masthead showing the Palace on the crest of Sydney’s ridges.

The disappearance of the Garden Palace from the Sydney skyline after the great fire, devastated the community and created a loss of identity that had been attached to its architecture and its harbour-side position as the ceremonial gateway to the city. The rising Post Office tower now took its place as a focal point on the city skyline. In Bevan’s terms, the Post Office was becoming a powerfully symbolic building that represented the people of nineteenth-century Sydney through its imposing architecture, central city location and important function. A Daily Telegraph journalist writing in 1886 went as far as to say that the building was
not only part of the community’s identity, but a part of their living being as well, with animate qualities;

Our successors, in the centuries to come, might readily see in this stately tower, rising from a building through which written words alive with human thoughts and feelings flow with a ceaseless and mighty current, and itself so closely linked with the lives of the people, a semi-conscious organism of the public life [rather] than a dead structure of irresponsible sandstone.\(^{35}\)

It was in this post-exhibition context of intense urban focus that James Barnet designed the sculptural decoration for the three facades of the new Post Office. The earliest completed, those addressing George Street and Martin Place, are in the traditional classical style and feature symbolic figures representing the Arts, Sciences, Agriculture and Commerce; and the fifty-one keystone heads depict classical gods, individuals, seasons and nations, including Australia and her six colonies. Two of the sculptors who contributed to this work were commissioned by James Barnet because of the quality of the sculptural pieces they had exhibited at the Sydney International Exhibition. Achille Simonetti, an Italian-Australian sculptor, had won first prize for his marble bust of Commodore Goodenough and plaster bust of Justice Faucett, and was awarded an honourable mention for his sculpture, *Venus of the South* – considered a fine example of Australian allegory.\(^{36}\) Giovanni Fontana, a visiting Italian sculptor, had exhibited several classical-style sculptures in the Italian Court which were purchased by Parkes to permanently adorn the Garden Palace and adjoining grounds.\(^{37}\) For the Martin Place façade of the post office, Fontana produced three figures above the central arch. They depict Queen Victoria in regal dress, seated beneath the winged Heralds of Fame, who hold a laurel wreath over the monarch’s head. At her feet are the reclining Britannia and the young and beautiful New South Wales, holding hands in a gesture of unity and kinship. Beneath them are the Royal Arms of Great Britain. The allegorical symbolism conveys the imperial connection in a language that everyone could understand. It expresses the desire for a secure identity and international status – to meet the world as a distinctive yet equal nation.

Barnet abandoned traditional classical models when he commissioned carvings for the Pitt Street façade in 1882. He asked the contractor to substitute the planned ornamental panels with *basso-relievo* carvings, a more natural form of sculptural representation that was to illustrate aspects of contemporary colonial society. These carvings were completed by another Italian-Australian sculptor, Tomaso Sani, and represent professions and trades and scenes from every-day nineteenth-century colonial life: the telegraph, professions of law and physics, agriculture and pastoral pursuits, literature and the press, mining and commerce, science and art, banking and the Post Office. The stylised realism of Sani’s carvings ‘affronted sculptural orthodoxy’\(^{38}\) and provoked a bitter debate that continued for more than seven years until the carvings were finally accepted in 1890 as ‘creditable to the infant art of this country’\(^{39}\) and ‘the beginning of art in Australia’.\(^{40}\)

At the Sydney International Exhibition great lengths had been taken to display European culture and old-world values, and local visitors came away inspired to emulate what they had seen, encouraged to contemplate their own characteristics but often left harbouring concerns about the lack of recognisable Australian cultural identity. Significant urban improvement in the following years led to a widely-held feeling that the challenge was not simply to create an antipodean London or Paris, but a city with its own Australian character.\(^{41}\) James Barnet’s decision to depict scenes from colonial life in the Pitt Street carvings was perhaps influenced by a desire to give Sydney a unique character, and possibly built upon the Australian content of the interior decorations of the Garden Palace. The frieze beneath the Garden Palace dome had featured a series of lunettes that represented the distinctively Australian occupations of Farmer, Miner, and Shearer, alongside the more universal ones of Carpenter, Smith, Painter, Potter, Mason, Cooper, Jeweller, Printer and Machinist. The ‘Aesthetic’ decoration running along the seventy-two gallery front panels had added the Waratah and Southern Cross to the emblematic tripod of Rose, Thistle, and Shamrock.

Reflecting on the exhibition, Barnet, a dyed-in-the-wool classicist, must have become aware of a growing opposition to classicism that considered the liberal arts irrelevant to the real needs of the majority of the population. There are no grounds to suggest that he was abandoning his
classical ideals when he commissioned the *basso-relievo* carvings for the post office. Throughout his long career, the Colonial Architect took a remarkably consistent classical approach to design and showed ‘no compulsion to re-assess principles’. Indeed, the precedents he cited for Sani’s post office carvings were examples of realistic decoration in Rome and Venice, as well as examples by respected English architects Christopher Wren, Charles Barry and Gilbert Scott. Instead, Barnet’s choices of style and subject matter for the carvings were intended to give a new dimension to the European tradition and were thoroughly consistent with a classical philosophy that, committed to the conceptual model of the ancient *polis*, considered architecture’s role to be one of integrating the individual citizen with his society: the carvings were to provide true representations of Australian life that could be appreciated by the general population.

The Quest for an Architectural Style Capturing Australian Identity

At the same time as Barnet was commissioning the contemporary Pitt Street carvings, yet holding firmly to his classical principles, other architects were engaging in uninhibited eclecticism, combining a medley of architectural elements in ways that destroyed the purity of the classical styles. Prominent local architects urged their colleagues to consider seeking an architectural style suited to Australian conditions but there was no agreement as to what this style might be. Architects began adapting the English Queen Anne and American Shingle styles, among others, for domestic purposes, and from this experimentation in the decades before and after Federation, what has since been called the ‘Australian Federation’ style emerged.

Julie Willis and Philip Goad argue that ‘The term does not simply refer uncritically to a period of time, but imparts an understanding of the political and architectural context.’ The style was pluralistic and took many forms but nevertheless was characterised by some quintessentially Australian elements. If there is such a thing as a typical Federation house, it is a detached bungalow set in landscaped gardens and rolling lawns. A steeply pitched Marseilles tiled roof sweeping low to the ground dominates the architecture and provides a strong sense of shelter. Roof scapes are picturesque, asymmetrical and multi-gabled, often with tall chimneys; all apexes, ridge-lines, gable ends and hip transitions are highlighted with decorative terracotta finials and crested ridge capping. Below the roof, the walls are typically composed of three distinct sections: the upper wall or gable usually of shinglework or roughcast, the middle wall of tuck pointed red face-brick, and the base of rusticated sandstone. Verandahs and balconies are integrated under the sweeping roof. Inside and out there is a richness of decorative materials including elaborate turned and geometric timber work, brickwork strapping, leadlight windows, shaped cement window-sill moulds, glazed tiles and polished brass fittings. Many of the decorative motifs are derived from native flora and fauna. Even the most modest houses boast a simple arrangement of radiating timber slats in a ‘sunburst’ design, symbolising the spirit of a new nation and the beginning of a new century. Climatic considerations dictated some of the style’s most characteristic features: deep overhanging eaves to keep the house cool and provide protection from driving rain. Open verandahs and generous doorways to catch the breeze and cater for the informal, outdoor lifestyle of the occupants. The Federation style resonated with the public because it translated sentiments of national identity into material form. People loved it so much that before long speculative builders were dressing whole suburbs of detached cottages in the ‘Federation’ style.

Reconciling a Distinctive Pastoral Identity to an Urban Lifestyle

Many aspects of the Federation house revealed an increasing identification of the people with the unique characteristics of the Australian landscape. The form of the bungalow was reminiscent of the quintessential country homestead of early colonial days. The new materials introduced the colours of brownish-orange terracotta and red brick – ‘colours that would enhance architecture in its Australian setting … against the greyness of the prevailing stucco mode’ and would bring the outback into the city. Native flora and fauna and the rising sun provided motifs for external and internal decoration. So, here we have the private house – the smallest unit of the city and a result
of the urban ethos of the previous twenty years – returning to a romantic expression of the pastoral ethos that had dominated early colonial culture.

Likewise, the mixture of pastoral and urban pastimes and imagery derived from the landscape depicted in the carvings of the General Post Office gave material form to sentiments of identity that incorporated both the bush and the city. The exhibition had also displayed this duality in its agricultural and mineral exhibits from the land alongside manufactured items and artistic wares for an urban lifestyle, all on show in the context of a utopian exhibition-city within the actual city. Most Australians now lived in cities and towns, their everyday concerns were urban, and they were proud of the marvellous European-style cities they had built. Nonetheless, they were still lovers of the bush, wishing also to identify with the rural pioneers and their personal qualities, agitating for the establishment of national parks, and cherishing the unique features of the Antipodes. They loved bushwalking in the Blue Mountains as much as they enjoyed reading the daily newspapers with their urban focus on new buildings, new suburbs and urban improvements. Thus Australian identity and nationalism were compatible both with belonging to the land and with an urban-based civic pride.48

The material concentration of the city came to be strongly associated with the status of the nation-colony of New South Wales, and with nation building. As the general population recognised the pivotal role-played by the city in the life of the colony an urban ethos was being formed. Sydney became part of an accessible, comprehensive popular culture in a way it had not been before. In contrast to the established pastoral image that set Australia apart from the great nations, urbanism provided a shared language with the Old World, essential to the construction of an Australian national identity.49 According to Hirst, a secure and distinctive identity was a necessary prerequisite for Federation.

Telecommunications and the Forging of a Continental Brotherhood

Many believed that a political union of the colonies was the continent’s destiny. The people occupied one continent (forgetting Tasmania), were of one blood (conveniently ignoring the forgotten Aborigines and unwanted Chinese) and of one religion (overlooking the Protestant / Catholic divide). The fact that the colonies occupied one continent had already necessitated their cooperation on important matters. Kevin Livingstone has identified the instrumental role that telecommunications played in the Federation movement in *The Wired Nation Continent: The Communication Revolution and Federating Australia*. Intercolonial collaboration between politicians and bureaucrats had been required to establish the original intercolonial telegraph network and regular intercolonial conferences were held to discuss communications issues that transcended colonial boundaries, such as overseas mail and cable routes, and uniform postage and telegraph rates. Nearly half of the conferences held before Federation concerned postal, telegraphic and associated services. These conferences were widely reported in the press and by the 1890s fostered a federal ethos by showing that Federation was practical.50

The post office was a key public building in every Australian colony because the survival of such distant communities depended upon reliable communication between themselves and the rest of the world. Just eight years after separating from New South Wales in 1851, the colony of Victoria embarked upon the construction of a classical post office with trabeated classical orders, vaulted arcades at street level and impressive Renaissance spaces. Likewise, Adelaide, which had become an independent colony in 1856, built a stately post office in 1867. The arrival of mail from Britain was indicated by a flag during the day and a red light at night.

It is appropriate that Robert Garran should have written a poem that makes a metaphorical connection between the completion of the Sydney General Post Office, the most important building in the colony, with the attainment of the most important political goal of its citizenry: poetry being a vehicle for expressing hopes and aspirations and for promoting noble causes. The services provided by the General Post Office connected colonial Australians to the rest of the world and to each other. They were no longer isolated by a dependence on the fixed shipping routes to bring news from afar,
but could conduct their affairs with greater independence and immediacy via the overseas cables. Within Australia, more efficient postal services and the extensive telegraph network were forging a continental brotherhood. Indeed, one of the first functions of the new federal government was to take over from the colonies, on 1 March 1901, responsibility for ‘postal, telegraphic, telephonic, and other like services’.

The Post Office’s grand architecture was a cultural symbol that reminded Sydneysiders they were part of a larger national and international community. The completion of the clock tower in 1891 marked a new stage in the life of the city, which had become a platform for citizenship and political engagement. The urban ethos of the 1880s was evolving into a national spirit of patriotism in which there was an interconnected and complementary relationship between the ideals and aspirations of society and the physical form of its metropolis. The city and its buildings expressed in tangible form the emergence and growth of sentiments of national identity as people came to see themselves as Australians, contemplating the possibility of nationhood.

Ten years later, Federation celebrations brought Australians together through the sending of simultaneous telegrams to post offices around the continent, and to England. One can imagine the five bells of the Sydney General Post Office clock tower ringing out the joyful tidings of the birth of a nation.
The crowning glory of Sydney’s General Post Office is its clock tower, finally completed in 1891.  
Photo: Kirsten Orr
The carvings by Tomaso Sani on the Pitt Street façade of the Sydney General Post Office represent professions and trades and scenes from every-day nineteenth-century colonial life.

*Photos: Kirsten Orr*
Notes

3Hirst, pp.15-25.
7Bridges & Appleton, p.43.
9Hirst notes that while Samuel Griffith was writing the Constitution at the Sydney Convention in 1891 he was also directing troops by telegraph in a bitter shearers’ strike. Hirst, p.102.
10Eager to show the world that the colony was not a cultural wasteland, two volumes of literary works edited by G.B. Barton were published for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867. The progress of colonial literature was displayed with pride in Literature in New South Wales and The Poets and Prose Writers of New South Wales.
12Some poetry and music was commissioned by the host governments, and others spontaneously inspired by the great event. Poems are to be found scattered through newspapers, periodicals and sheet music. One example is by W.H. Smith, The Australian Exhibition Schottische, William Bullard, Sydney, 1880, ‘dedicated by kind permission to P.A. Jennings, Esq., C.M.G., Executive Commissioner’.
14Ibid., pp.7-8.
17Hirst, p.15.
20In Sydney, Premier Henry Parkes’s 1882 proposal for new buildings to house the National Art Gallery and Free Public Library sought to raise the cultural sophistication of the city to new heights. Henry Parkes, New South Wales Parliamentary Debates (1881-1882), 5 October, pp.732-737.
21This was typical of the New World where connections were made between the establishment and growth of new towns and Old World civilising values. David Hamer, New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.
22At the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition of 1876, photographic views of the cities of Sydney and Melbourne formed a prominent part of both the New South Wales and Victorian courts. New York Times, 8 May 1876, p.4. Two years later, the photographs of marvellous Melbourne exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878 proved so popular that a large number were presented to the French Government. Dr Catherine de Lorenzo at the University of New South Wales has completed research into Australian and Oceanic photographs held in French collections.
23See for example the observations in 1880 of the London agent for The Sydney Morning Herald cited in Hamer, p.160.
24An article titled ‘Commercial Architecture’ was one of many promotional newspaper supplements run in conjunction with the Sydney International Exhibition, for local and international consumption. It was accompanied by a souvenir map and general information on the colony. Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier, 12 July 1879, p.21.
25The excursion to the lantern at the top of the northern tower of the Garden Palace proved to be one of the defining experiences of visiting the Sydney International Exhibition and Norman Selfe noted that the passenger lift was ‘about the best paying feature’. Official Record of the Sydney International Exhibition, 1879, Thomas Richards Government Printer, Sydney, 1881, p.566. The large number of aerial photographic views taken from the Garden Palace roof by Charles Bayliss and others testifies to the popular appeal of the panorama and the heavy demand for souvenirs to remember it by.
Anticipation of Federation caused Australians to consider how best to deal with the imperial connection. At international exhibitions overseas Britain persisted in portraying Australia as a culturally undeveloped white frontier settlement providing primary products for her secondary industries, but the Australians preferred to display items that showed the progress and cultural achievements of their colonies. Orr, ‘A Force for Federation’, pp.494-500.

Nothing brought this home more than the activity generated by the exhibitions on Sydney Harbour. See for example Illustrated Sydney News, 4 October 1879, p.20; and photographs by Charles Bayliss such as ‘Garden Palace’ [and Sydney Harbour embellished with ships of war of all nations], 1879-1882, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, SPF/267.

The New South Wales Parliamentary Papers for the period 1879-1880 contain reports from the Trustees of the Australian Museum and the Sydney Free Public Library anticipating new opportunities arising from the Sydney International Exhibition. The exhibition highlighted the need to establish new facilities for art, literature and technical education.


Illustrated Sydney News, 4 October 1879.

Parkes understood that the Garden Palace had become a popular symbol of the progress of civilisation in the colony and after the fire attempted to transfer the colony’s sentimental attachment to the Garden Palace to new cultural institutions.


Daniel Thomas, Australian Art in the 1870s, Trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1976, p.43.

Ann Toy, ‘Politics and Patronage: Sir Henry Parkes’s Exhibition Legacies’, in Proudfoot, Maguire & Freestone (eds), p.195 More than forty sculptures were purchased by Parkes from a number of Italian artists. All but the handful kept in the Colonial Secretary’s offices were destroyed in the Garden Palace fire of 1882.


Henry Parkes to the Legislative Assembly, cited in Bridges & Appleton, p.54.

Mr Hawken to the Legislative Assembly, cited in Chris Johnson, ‘Barnet and Australian Identity: Universal or Local, Imported or Native?’, in John Howells & Michael Nicholson, Sydney Morning Herald, 4 August 1879, p.3.


Illustrated Sydney News, 4 October 1879.


John Horbury Hunt, the President of the New South Wales Institute of Architects proclaimed that architecture had a role to play in nation building and should ‘be the means of influencing the habits of modern nations’. John Horbury Hunt, ‘Address to the Institute of Architects of New South Wales’, The Building and Engineering Journal, 22 June 1889, pp.479-481.


The ‘outback’ is an Australian term for the remote, sparsely inhabited back country. A. Delbridge (ed.), The Macquarie Dictionary, Macquarie Library, Macquarie University, 1981.

