

## **Craigieburn Bypass: a semiotic entry into Melbourne**

Adrian Parr, 2005

In what way is the urban landscape of Melbourne different to that of Sydney? Without buying into the humorous rivalry that has shaped the perception of Sydney-siders and Melbournians alike there is one key difference between the two. As artist Robert Owen has described it, and I would tend to agree with him, Melbourne is a semiotic landscape in so far as it does not rely upon the grand symbolic vocabulary that defines Sydney. For instance, when one thinks of Sydney, more often than not the Opera House or Harbor Bridge spring to mind. However, with Melbourne one may be more tempted to think of the colors, textures and shapes that construct a sense of Melbournian place. It is this focus on urban textuality that has shaped the design of Melbourne's new Craigieburn Bypass.

Situated at the edges of the city of Melbourne the Bypass connects the Hume Freeway with the Metropolitan Ring Road. The first section of the project was opened on 21 December 2004 and is the result of the collaborative efforts of artist Robert Owen, Melbourne landscape architects Taylor Culty Lethlean and Sydney architects Tonkin Zulaikha Greer. The \$306 million Bypass, funded by the Australian Federal Government aims to ease traffic congestion on the Hume Highway for the some 75,000 vehicles traveling daily along this stretch of road, reducing driving time by approximately thirty minutes. In turn, road safety will improve as the irritations associated with continually stopping and starting at approximately ten different traffic lights is eased.

Sensitive to the delicate ecological equilibrium of the natural grasslands in the area, VicRoads ensured early on in the project that all contractors used environmentally friendly practices and management strategies so as to keep any negative environmental effects at bay. Using three guiding principles – sensitivity toward the social environment, cultural history and the natural environment – design and development took an ecosophical approach. Setting out to be as attentive as possible to the social environment, the designers worked closely with locals, drawing inspiration from the visual cultures of this largely immigrant community in their design of the noise wall. Secondly, the Aboriginal community was regularly consulted in an effort to help salvage and preserve any artifacts that happened to be discovered during the construction phase: a gesture that respectfully acknowledged the memory of the Wurundjeri people who once lived in the area. Lastly, taking into consideration the delicate ecological equilibrium of the wetlands that are home to the Southern bell frog and the striped legless lizard, large conduits were strategically placed near the freeway to allow the frogs to safely cross. Also after consulting with Environment

Australia and Natural Resources and Environment, water treatments were used to protect the water streams of Merri Creek from contamination.

The semiotic field of the design draws on the colorful vocabulary of Denton Corker Marshall's Citilink Freeway sound barriers that drivers encounter further on down the road, subtly feeding off the signature reds and yellows of this design. These color schemas reappear at night throughout one stretch of the sound barrier in the form of lighting shifts and modulations. Scrambled computer text using the Latin names of the nearby native grasslands were sandblasted onto the perspex noise walls producing a sense of repetition that visually gives rise to an internal system of differentiation whilst also drawing on the surrounding suburbs for inspiration; namely the lace curtains hanging in many of the windows of the homes in the surrounding suburbs of Lalor and Campbellfield. What is more is that the textured noise wall also makes reference to the Lucio Fontana painting in the National Gallery of Victoria. In this way, the semiotic layers continue to weave throughout the surfaces of the sound barriers providing a sense of texture and movement whilst concomitantly forming connections across space and time.

If arriving into the city at night the noise wall is transformed into a large flickering curtain filled with color as LED lights transform in response to traffic density: the colorful light patterns have been programmed to amplify the denser the traffic becomes. The blue blades robustly lining the edges of the freeway gradually open up as one travels down the road framing the cityscape like an unfolding venetian blind. Approaching the city the twisting rusty red structure of the footbridge stretching alongside the road moves its body over and across the freeway like a snake peeling its skin, simultaneously dramatically framing the view of Melbourne's skyline. The semiotic dialogue continues as ochre reminds one of the volcanic activity that once defined the nearby region of Mount Ridley.

This is a design that successfully encourages one to 'read' the city of Melbourne as a field of color, form and materiality. All in all, the Bypass produces some intelligent connections that both embrace the cultural and ecological particulars of the immediate surrounds, as well as bringing to life the overall semiotic textures of the city as a whole. This is a complex yet organized design whose most striking feature is the way in which memory overlaps with the specificity of place, all the while patterning a new place within the parameters of what already exists. The Bypass therefore, does not act as a dividing line; it is neither an arbitrary addition nor a contained space. Rather, it draws on, echoes and ultimately inhabits the textual qualities indicative of Melbourne as a whole.