

Frottage City – Sydney

A reflection on Frottage City

I was sent an English translation of Jean-Louis Cohen's essay, *Frottage City*, during COVID lock-down in a city, within a world, that had momentarily shrunk to the boundaries of a 27 inch computer screen. Opening it was like explosion of architectural culture in my in-box. For this panel, I was keen to find an urban situation from my own city, Sydney, where I could detect some sense of the density of cultural continuity suffusing Cohen's text.

The essay begins with an examination of the idea of quotation in literary and artistic practice, and then moves towards how these concepts have informed architecture, before moving to urbanism as the primary focus.

In reflecting on Sydney, I kept circling back towards the scale of the architectural project, rather than the urban structure, as being the intellectually catalysing urban element of the city. I have selected a series of interventions along George Street to illustrate some of the actions that Cohen has identified, searching for those that have transformed the urban hierarchy of the city through architecture.

The thread begins at 350 George Street, originally known as the Equitable Building, and now referred to as the Societe Generale Building. The Equitable Life Assurance Company sent American architect, Edward Raht, to Australia to lead the design and construction of their Sydney and Melbourne headquarters, completed in 1892 and 1896 respectively. The Sydney building raises the first of Cohen's observations, that of quotation through 'intericonicity', which he describes as the circulation of images from one project or building to another.

In this instance Raht, quite literally, imported the urban image of the American Romanesque to Australia, along with the prefabricated steel framing technology that could realise it.



Equitable Life Assurance Offices, by Henry King, from the Tyrrell Collection Powerhouse Collection <https://collection.maas.museum/object/30827#&gid=1&pid=1> museum

It is claimed that this was also the first use of the exceptionally hard trachyte stone for the façade of a building in Australia, which until that time had been typically used for foundations, smaller decorative elements or kerbing. With these extraordinary facades Raht brought an emphatic urban scale to an emergent colonial outpost. The muscularity of its rock face trachyte blocks, the measured repetition of its arches, the virtuosic modelling of depth with inner and outer layers set apart with grids of glass lenses, is undoubtedly still one of the most powerful urban thresholds in the city.

These elements were the vehicle for the translation of an American language into a local one further south along George Street, in the Queen Victoria Markets. This form of translation relates to the second type of relationship that Cohen identified, the 'intertectonic', which he describes as the transfer of tectonic characteristics from one building to another, either literally or through inflexions.

The design of the Queen Victoria Markets accelerated in 1892, the year that the Societe Generale building was completed. The City Architect, George McRae prepared four options for the façade which are typically categorised as Gothic, Queen Anne, Renaissance and the new Romanesque, which was selected, and which translated many of the elements of Raht's imported exemplar.

McRae's building is also founded on trachyte at street level, but above that it translates the elements of Raht's Romanesque into a much finer textural language more suited to the bedrock material of Sydney, its yellow-block Pyrmont sandstone. I particularly note the quotation of the circular pilasters in groups of three and four to turn the corner and to frame the intermediary supporting columns. They adopt a smoothed curved profile in plan and comparatively finer scale against their linear datums. The delicate decorative carving on the surface beneath the cornice maintains a textural resemblance to Raht's language, but is translated to better suit the physical characteristics of the Pyrmont stone.

The story pauses briefly after 1898 because urban and architectural threads are tenuous and never certain of being picked up again. Indeed, the following century sees the degradation and near demolition of the Queen Victoria Markets by the 1960's, its subsequent classification by the National Trust in 1974, and the completion of its refurbishment in 1986.



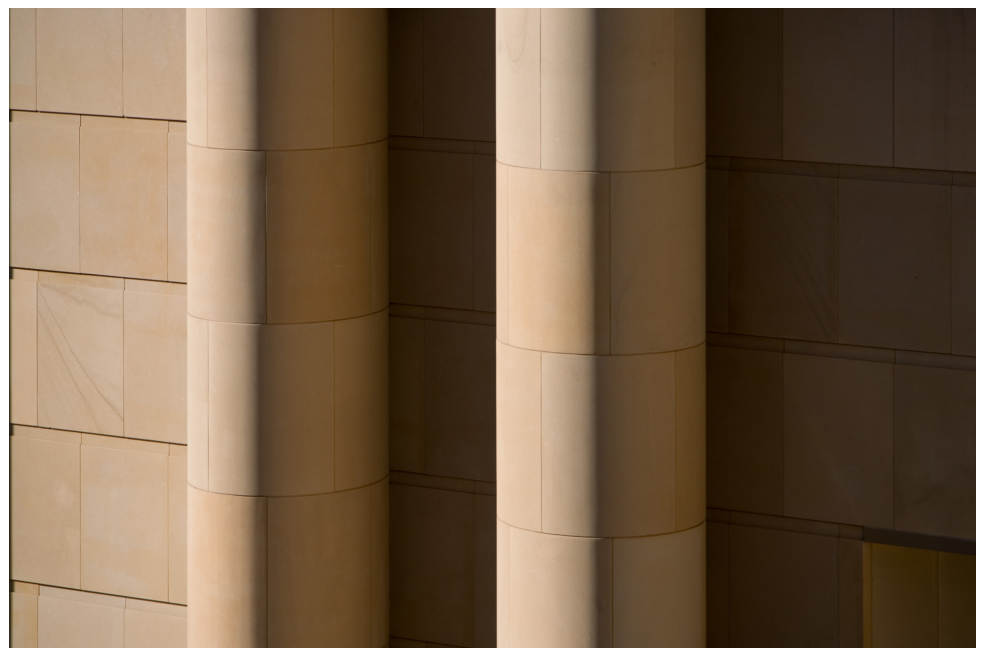
Queen Victoria Building ca. 1900-1910, State Library of NSW, (92eVwX0Y)

The 60's proposals for demolition were sparked by the building's apparent incongruity with the emerging modern aspiration of that decade, which was reflected in the approval of the Hilton Hotel opposite the QVB by Kolos and Bryant in 1969. But the Hilton becomes a much more substantial part of the urban story in 2005 when Johnson Pilton Walker is given the opportunity to refurbish the hotel.

This became a moment of intertectonic translation across time. McRae's finely reeded sandstone pilasters were reconsidered in terms of the scale of modernity that the city had acquired in the intervening century. The Hilton's pilasters are drawn into deep elliptical

forms – breaking free to become columns in the building's public interfaces where they push inside and outside the glazing line to define the facade as a thickened place for occupation. Sandstone is now used as cladding, rather than load bearing structure, so is thin, but is shaped and configured to conjure scale and strength. The three dark polished granite columns on George Street instantly pull me back to the deep lustre of polished trachyte.

There is a beautiful quote at the beginning of Cohen's essay, from the philosopher Nelson Goodman, that raises the question of the specifics of the idea of quotation in visual form. The quote reads –



Hilton Hotel, Johnson Pilton Walker, 2005 <https://jpw.com.au/projects/sydney-hilton/>

'a picture directly quotes another only if it both refers to and contains it. But what are the means by which a picture refers to another that it contains? In other words, what is the pictorial analogue of quotation marks?'

I have always enjoyed the zone created within the depth of the façade of the Hilton Hotel but have never been able to so clearly articulate why until reading this quote from Goodman, via Cohen. It is the very sensation of simultaneously referring and containing that makes this urban experience so distinctive. It is afforded by the dramatization of the depth and the translation of the architectonic reference. I am 'looking at' it, but also 'sitting within' it, at the same time.

This element is translated yet again in 2015, in the AHL Headquarters by Candalepas Associates immediately adjacent the Hilton. The AHL's columns are circular at the external tips where they face the QVB's pilasters and tapered to a very fine point on the inside face where they register the more delicate scale of McRae's opposing pilasters as observed from the interior of the building.

Not structure – now not even enclosure, but a façade entirely decoupled and given to the street. Prised apart this time with

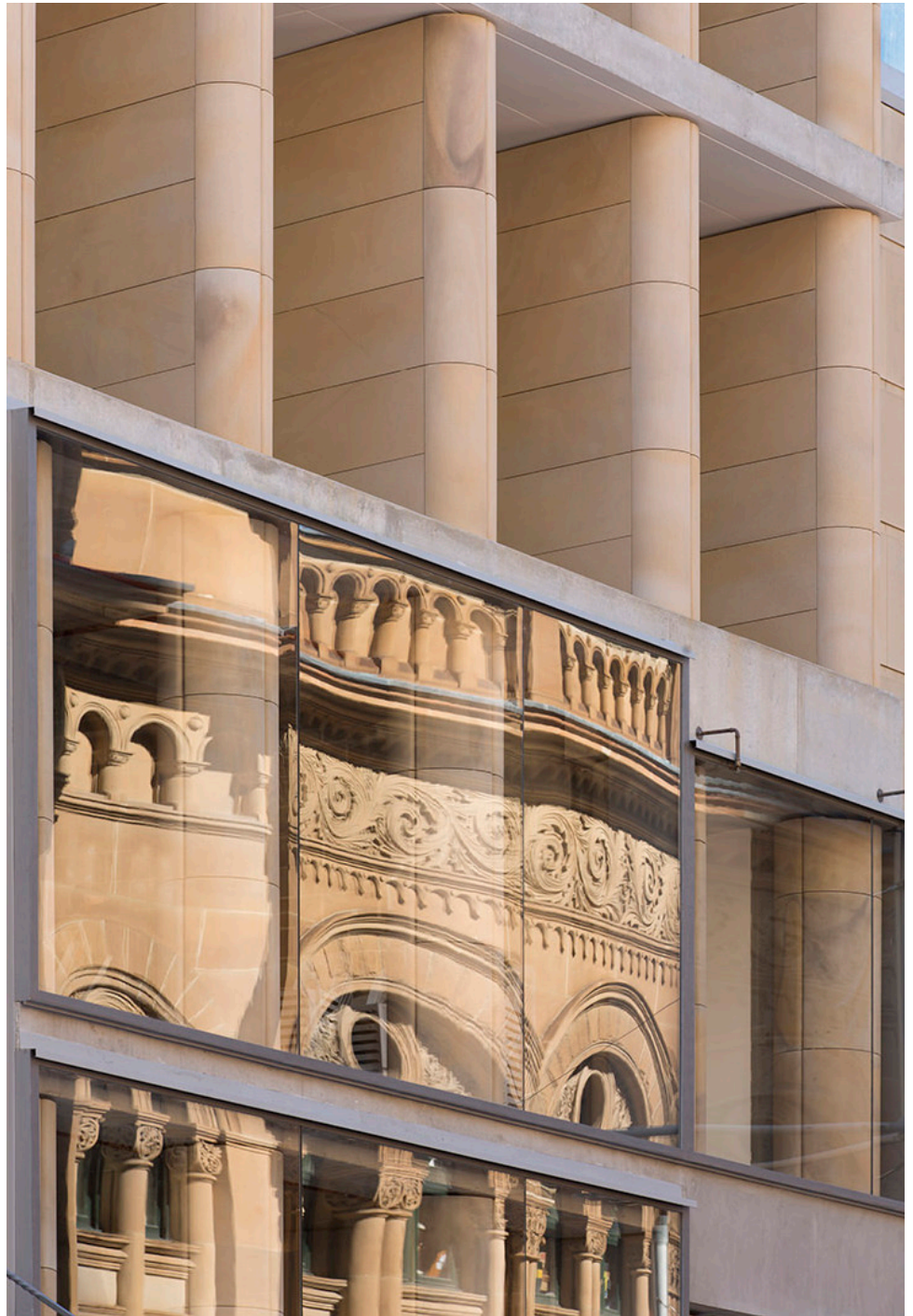


Hilton Hotel, Johnson Pilton Walker, 2005
<https://jpw.com.au/projects/sydney-hilton/>

concrete, rather than glass, but nonetheless, again I'm drawn to Raht's sophisticated separation of the urban and interior orders within the facade of the Societe General.

There is a moment where the glass comes to the face in the lower part of the AHL building, and in just the right light, and at just the right time, we are offered a simultaneous experience of the elements in reflection – as the original and its translation reverberate visually against each other, or quite literally in Goodman's terms, the building reflects and contains the other.

But the references are not only limited to Raht and McRae. In the section of his essay where he talks about 'transurbanity' Cohen discusses the translation of urban archiform and he describes elements of the urban fabric of cities as being qualified as "emitters" in their ability to generate transposable forms. He gives examples of elements of urban structure such as streets and squares but at this point it is difficult not to look at these contemporary Sydney projects and to also draw Rafael Moneo into this analysis with the Murcia Town Hall from 1998.



AHL Headquarters, Candalepas Associates 2015 <https://www.candalepas.com.au/home/projects/ahl-headquarters/>

This highly specific example demonstrates the idea of architectural culture as a vital force in the urban transformation of the city. One that allows the structure of the city to evolve in a precise way, through multiple actions.

Of course the contemporary city shifts ever more quickly now, accelerated by the voraciousness of capitalism, but must this mean that we entirely neglect the nuance of urban evolution and the role of architectural culture in it?

Might the idea of the Frottage City prompt reflection in the architects and politicians busily lighting fuses on the monocultural corporate rockets that are congealing the architectural morphology of the northern, southern and western edges of central Sydney?

References

1. "Frottage City," Jean-Louis Cohen, *Matières* no. 16 (2020): 60-79. Terms and references in this essay were taken from the English translation by Christian Hubert, 2020.
2. Appendix A 350 George Street, Conservation Management Plan, Tanner Kibble Denton, 2020
3. Conservation Management Plan, Queen Victoria Building: 455 George Sydney, Urbis, 2019