

VILLAWOODMIGRANT HOSTEL

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The site of the Villawood Migrant Hostel is better known today as the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. It

is a fascinating study because it embodies the evolution of federal policy regarding immigration to Australia. It is significant because it provides insight into Australia's concerns in the post-war period, the migrant experience in Commonwealth migrant accommodation and the growth of Greater Sydney through the development of local suburbs.

Description of Villawood Migrant Hostel

At the time that the Villawood Migrant Hostel was proposed “the site was largely covered with natural bush.”¹ These were cleared in 1949 to make way for the development of migrant accommodation. The Villawood Migrant Hostel was dominated by nissen huts of different sizes which were mostly used as housing for New Australians. The hostel also contained a kitchen and dining room, a linen store, hawkely prefabricated buildings which also housed migrants and importantly two childcare buildings. The hostel had a maximum of 1425 residents in 1964 but it had a capacity for 2750.² The staff numbered about 130 persons and lived on the premises. From 1968 the site was separated into two hostels known as Villawood and Westbridge Migrant Hostels. Towards the end of the 1960's and into the early 1970's a redevelopment program was conducted which demolished a lot of the older migrant huts and in their place erected multiple story brick buildings which were a much higher standard of living. The 1950's immigrants at Villawood were

¹ “Villawood Immigration Centre”, Australian Heritage Database, p2

² J. Lawrence, B. Madden and L. Muir, A Pictorial History of Canterbury Bankstown, Alexandria, Kingsclear Books, 1999, p107

mostly British and Eastern European. “In the late 1960's migrants were arriving from South America, Turkey, Lebanon, Spain, Czechoslovakia, and Africa. By the 1970's migrants from Indo China and East-Timor were housed in the hostel.”³ The Villawood Immigration Detention Centre was established in 1984 and is located at the centre of the former Villawood Immigration Detention Centre.



A building from the redevelopment program at Villawood Migrant Hostel, 1973

Post-War Immigration to Australia

³ “Villawood Immigration Centre, op.cit., p2

“Populate or Perish”

The post-war period in Australia is characterised by a huge surge in immigration of which the government was the leading proponent. The threat of invasion by Japanese forces during the Pacific war exposed Australia’s vulnerability and isolation from strong allies. In light of this, it was considered imperative by some distinguished political leaders, like Prime Minister John Curtin, to “support sustained immigration in order to increase the total population to a number deemed capable of effectively defending the country.”⁴ In 1945 Arthur Calwell was appointed as the first Minister for Immigration, a newly created portfolio for the specific purpose of marketing and administering immigration to Australia. According to Calwell immigration was not only critical to the defence of the nation but also to its economic prosperity. Low birth-rates in the 1920’s and 1930’s coupled with the burden of global economic downturn following World War II had stunted the economic viability of Australia in the post-war period. Immigration was perceived as key to stimulating economic development because “a larger domestic population would provide better markets”⁵ and thus better economic capability.

“Australia – Land of Tomorrow”

According to Calwell’s calculations the sustainable population increase of Australia was 2% per year including 1% from the natural increase of Australian citizens and 1% from immigration. In an effort to achieve the projected population increase the

⁴ R. T. Appleyard, “Post-War British Immigration”, in ed. J. Gupp, The Australian People, Cambridge; New York; Oakley, Vic., Angus & Robertson, 1988, p97

⁵ Ed. I. Burnley, P. Murphy, B. Fagan, Immigration & Australian Cities, Leichardt, N.S.W., The Federation Press, 1997, p13

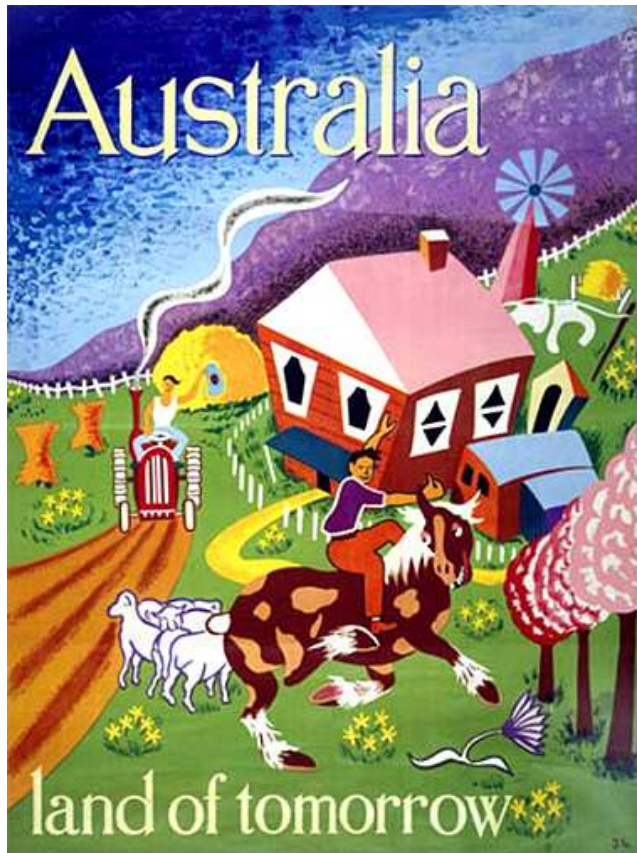
Commonwealth embarked on “intensive international promotional campaign to encourage migration to Australia.”⁶ At this time Australian immigration was dominated by the idea of a White Australia and so the natural targets of the campaign were British subjects. This was explicitly declared by Calwell, “It is my hope that for every foreign migrant there will be 10 from the United Kingdom.”⁷ British citizens were appealed to through assisted passages, a bi-partisan agreement reached in 1947 between the British and Australian governments which effectively paid for the transportation of British émigrés to Australia. This scheme was widely supported because it was “a means of populating Australia while retaining its British character.”⁸

The government used propaganda tactics to entice British and European immigration to Australia. Joe Greenberg’s “Australia, Land of Tomorrow” is one example of this. The rural setting is spacious and full of vibrancy which evokes emotions of hope and happiness. The caption suggests opportunity and prosperity. These features are in direct contrast to the crowded and impoverished European cities ravaged by the social, cultural, political and economic destruction of World War II. A Czech migrant later informed Joe Greenberg that this poster had influenced his decision to immigrate to Australia thus demonstrating the effectiveness of Commonwealth propaganda tactics.⁹

⁶ S. Thompson, “Statement of Significance Westbridge Migrant Hostel Bassinette c. 1950-1960s”, Migration Heritage Centre

⁷ R. T. Appleyard, op.cit., p97

⁸ J. Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p17



Joe Greenberg, "Australia, Land of Tomorrow"

Displaced Persons

The disappointing uptake of assisted immigration by Britons meant that the Australian government had to seek migrants from elsewhere. The impact of six years of war in Europe had left over 10

⁹ S. Thompson, "Statement of Significance Emigration Poster c.1948", Migration Heritage Centre

million people displaced. This became the major source of immigration to Australia in the post-war period as these people felt that their chance of building a new life would be made easier by relocating. Between 1947 and 1953 over 170,700 displaced persons of Central and Eastern European nationality arrived in Australia with the assistance of the Australian government. As part of their contract, displaced persons had to stay in Australia for at least two years and in that time were bound to work in whatever job they were placed regardless of prior skills and experience. In return they received hostel accommodation, unemployment benefits and facilities for learning English.



Three families, the Soriano family, the Alarcon family and the Serrano family listening to learn English records at the Villawood Migrant Hostel, Sydney. The families migrated from Spain.

The British flag which was mounted in the dining room of the Villawood Migrant Hostel next to a portrait of the Queen reveals the Australian attitude to non-British New Australians to assimilate into

the Anglo culture. Inherent in this is an assumption of Australia's connection to Britain in the post-war period.



Villawood in Context

The Villawood Migrant Hostel was established to accommodate the swell of 'New Australians' who arrived in the post-war migration program of the Australian government. Also known as the Villawood Workers Hostel and the Westbridge Migrant Hostel, the Villawood Migrant Hostel was officially opened on December 19, 1949. It operated within a larger network of other migrant hostels extended across Australia which were already overcrowded. In light of this, Villawood was initially established on a temporary basis to overcome the immediate accommodation crisis. However, the post-war housing shortage made it difficult for migrants to find a place of their own and many ended up staying at Villawood for prolonged

periods. For this reason it became one of the largest and longest running migrant hostels servicing the Sydney region. It is an important site because it reflects the development of Australian immigration policy and attitudes across time, it is connected to the growth of Greater Sydney through the development of local suburbs and it provides significant insight to migrant histories as it was the first home in Australia for many New Australians.

Villawood as Nation Building

Villawood reveals the nation building agenda of the Commonwealth in the post-war period through the dominance of child minding facilities at the hostel. Young adults were preferred immigrants because not only did their migration contribute to an ever-increasing population trajectory but they also represented the potential to reproduce and contribute to a future generation of Australian born children. A bassinette used at the Villawood Migrant Hostel that now belongs to a collection at the Powerhouse Museum titled "Objects Through Time" reflects the values of nation building encouraged in New Australians. The bassinette also suggests that the Villawood Migrant Hostel was a family place where people felt secure enough to bring a baby into the world. The bassinette belonged to the nursery at the Westbridge section of the Villawood Migrant Hostel. "Its rudimentary design and manufacture is indicative of the basic living standards endured at the hostel."¹⁰

¹⁰ S. Thompson, op.cit.



Bassinet from the Westbridge Migrant Hostel, Villawood, c. 1950 – 1960's

The Villawood Migrant Hostel Experience

Like many other post-war hostels in Australia, the accommodation at Villawood Migrant Hostel is characterised by the nissen hut. These had formerly been used in the war effort as part of the Leightonfields Munitions Factory but became redundant with the onset of peace. The federal government under Prime Minister Ben Chifley proposed to transform them into temporary migrant accommodation. They are best described as semi-cylindrical structures made out of corrugated iron. They were uninsulated thus

produced the most extreme of temperatures. The nissen huts ranged in size and the largest were about twenty metres long. The large huts were divided into four cabins with a different family living in each quarter. The cabins were separated by a flimsy partitioned wall which deprived families of any privacy. Each cabin consisted of two rooms with a bed in each. These small war time huts which should have housed two adults and possibly a child were often home for a family of seven to nine people. There was no private kitchen, laundry or bathroom attached as these facilities were communal.

View of the nissen huts at the Villawood Migrant Hostel in the 1950's.

The hostel was free for residents whilst they were looking for work. However upon finding a job they were obliged to report this to the hostel staff and commence payment to the hostel for rent and meals. Villawood managers, like H. G. Jennings, were concerned with illegal residents meaning anyone who earned an income but did not

declare it to the hostel authorities. Although this was in contravention of the migrant contract former Villawood resident Tony Dockery believes that for any New Australian with ambition it was imperative to deny notice of employment to the hostel authorities. According to Dockery the only way to benefit from the hostel service was to avoid its expenses and save all earned income to put towards a house. For Dockery, the inclination to work seven days a week was born out of a desire to stay away from the hostel for as much time a day as possible and get out of there as soon as possible. After nine months of living in the hostel in 1960, Dockery and his wife had saved up enough money to move out of Villawood and into a flat in Granville.

Many migrants, like Dockery and his family, were disappointed when they found themselves living in the austere conditions of the Villawood Migrant Hostel. The Australian government had marketed an image of Australia, like in Joe Greenberg's "Land of Tomorrow" which bore little resemblance to the reality of life in the hostels. Tony Dockery described the conditions as "shocking" and "putrid"¹¹. This sentiment appears to be widespread among residents who in 1958 sent a telegram to Prime Minister Menzies protesting about the conditions.¹² In the same year more than 500 migrants belonging to Villawood organised a protest raising their concern over the substandard housing, insufficient food and dictatorial management at Villawood.¹³ In 1961 The Villawood residents laid "charges of virtual starvation, stink and degradation"¹⁴ at the hostel

¹¹ Tony Dockery

¹² J. Lawrence, B. Madden and L. Muir, op.cit., p 107

¹³ "Migrants Protest at Policy and Housing", *Daily Telegraph*, 09/06/1958

¹⁴ J. Lawrence, B. Madden and L. Muir op.cit., p107

program. Their argument was that "We should have houses and jobs at least equal to what we had at home."¹⁵ Many migrants had left the dislocation and trauma of their homes in the hope of making a better life in Australia only to feel like they had taken a step backwards.

The Villawood Migrant Hostel was subject to many complaints from the residents. A telegram to the Prime Minister from Villawood resident, Mr. G. Prohaszka outlines the main grievances experienced by the hostel's population.¹⁶ Firstly, he notes that when he came to Australia with his wife in 1950 the conditions of the camp were of a significantly higher standard. This detail is useful because it suggests that the 1951 transfer of administration of the hostel from the Migrant Worker' Accommodation Division of the Department of Labour and National Service to the Commonwealth Hostels Ltd, a privately company funded by the Commonwealth Government, had an adverse effect on the conditions at Villawood.

Mr. G. Prohaszka raises meal provision as a major concern for the migrants. In short, the hostel food was unpleasant to eat. There were simply so many mouths to feed that quality came second to quantity. However, more upsetting for the migrants was that they were banned from cooking their own food. In the case of Mr. G. Prohaszka this was of particular offence because of his special dietary requirements which could not be accommodated by the hostel kitchen. This point created bitter resentment among the migrant community in Villawood who were forced to pay for food of poor standard. An article which appeared in *Our Women*, Aug-

¹⁵ "Migrants Protest at Policy and Housing", op.cit.

¹⁶ Appendix A.

Sep 1953, attempts to raise awareness of the inadequate conditions of migrant hostels with specific reference to the poor quality of food and the ban on migrants preparing their own food.¹⁷ The article draws attention to the inappropriateness of hostel food for children and mother's distress that their children's needs for nutritious food were not being met. It criticises the removal of a woman's ability to look after her family properly through food preparation. While this article addresses migrant hostels as a whole it is emblematic of the Villawood experience.



Two families, the Soriano family and the Alarcon family, join for a meal at the Villawood Migrant Hostel, Sydney.

Mr. G. Prohaszka also complained of the noise late at night. This provides some insight that Villawood was a rowdy place. Boisterous brawls, often in the communal areas of the hostel, were frequent occurrences at Villawood. This can be explained by the close proximity of residents of many nationalities coupled with living in confined quarters, the drain of full time work, and unpleasant food.

¹⁷ "Are British Migrants Getting A Fair Deal?" *Our Women*, Aug.-Sep., 1953, p14

On one occasion, a woman was held up and brutally bashed opposite the camp kitchen demonstrating the undercurrent of malicious violence at Villawood.¹⁸ According to Dockery, the police or ambulance services were called to attend Villawood at least every second night. Burglary was also a worry for Villawood residents. Each cabin contained a glass window which "at least once a week people tried to break into"¹⁹. Theft was usually committed by inhabitants of the hostel.

The authoritarian rule of the hostel staff at Villawood was also resented by the residents. Residents were required to keep their living quarters clean as part of their contract. Their rooms were subjected to weekly checks by the hostel staff. Dockery notes the irony of the checks in view of the abhorrent cockroach infestations in the cabins. The room checks were perceived by the migrants as an invasion of their privacy. Moreover, the residents were dissatisfied with the strict banning of alcohol and other luxury items in the hostel. A liquor bootlegger by the name of Fred Kutena was punished in 1951 for unlawfully selling liquor at Villawood.²⁰ This crime was perceived as so serious that he was threatened with losing his citizenship. Shortly after Kutena was apprehended the Villawood hostel managers banned the tobacco, drink and ice-cream vendor from selling products on the Villawood premises.

The general picture of the migrant experience at Villawood is one that is of immense pressure in poor living conditions. Dockery

¹⁸ Appendix B.

¹⁹ Tony Dockery

²⁰ "Bench Warns On Illegal Liquor In Migrant Camp", *Mirror*, 26/2/1951

remembers thinking “What have I done? I cannot live like this”. This sentiment of disappointment and regret is echoed by numerous other residents of migrant hostels across Australia in Patricia Donnelly’s book “Migrant Journeys”²¹. Inevitably the pressure took its toll on many families who stayed at the hostel. Dockery observed that it was an emotionally taxing time in his life on his marriage and his optimism. He saw many marriages break up in Villawood because of the pressure of existence in the hostel. The hostel experience in post-war Australia must be recognised as a raw introduction to Australian society and an intensely trying period in the lives of many new Australians because the hostel could never be a home.

Yet this is not the common story told of the Villawood Migrant Hostel. The shocking reality is not found in official sources. Instead it was represented as wholesome place espousing values of family, community and fairness. The photographic evidence of the Villawood Migrant Hostel is dominated by three families, the Soriano’s, Alarcon’s and Serrano’s. I would argue that these are propaganda photos because they construct Villawood as clean, as a place of community and as place of leisure. This contradicts my research gathered from newspaper articles, telegrams, and aural histories regarding the shocking experiences of migrants in Villawood hostel.

²¹ P. Donnelly, Migrant Journeys or “What the hell have we done?”, Ridleyton, S. A., Ariel Printing, 2000



Two families, the Soriano family and the Alarcon family, in the grounds of Villawood Migrant Hostel.

In light of the disparity between the representation of the Villawood Migrant Hostel and the actual experiences of the residents it is surprising that there is so little academic study on Villawood. I suggest that the significance of the Villawood Migrant Hostel has been overlooked by historians because it is considered to be an aspect of suburban history rather than an integral part of Sydney’s history.

The Growth of Greater Sydney Through the Development of Local Suburbs

The Villawood Migrant Hostel is an important site in a history of Sydney because it has contributed to the growth of Greater Sydney through the development of local suburbs. Firstly, it is important to explore the implications of migrant accommodation housing at Villawood. The Villawood site was selected because of its relatively easy transformation from the Leightonfields Munitions Factory into

temporary migrant accommodation. Yet there were several other important factors that led to the establishment of the Villawood Migrant Hostel.

The location of Villawood 40km west of the Sydney CBD is significant because it reflects the perception of Sydney as the centre from which the undesirable elements are pushed to the outskirts. In this case, hundreds of thousands of poor foreign immigrants were better out of sight and out of mind. Thus the western suburbs of Sydney have always been perceived as inferior because of their migrant and working class origins. This perception of Western Sydney as inferior reflects both a persistent Eurocentric attitude in Sydney and also a hierarchical attitude based on wealth

Immigration hostels were located close to industry so that migrants could be located close to where jobs were available. “One positive outcome of World War II was increased industrialisation which led to a post-war boom in industry in Bankstown.”²² For example, between 1948 and 1954 over 7000 new businesses were operating in the Bankstown area.²³ This was another reason a migrant hostel was strategically established in Villawood.

When migrants left the Villawood Migrant Hostel many chose to stay and settle in the Bankstown area. This was either because they had found jobs in the area, because they had formed associations with people in the area or because of a strong connection with the area based their introduction to Australian society. This led to a

²² The History of Bankstown: From Settlement to City, Bankstown N. S. W., Bankstown City Council, 2003, p14

²³ *Ibid.*, p14

huge population surge in the Bankstown area. For example, between 1945 and 1948 the Bankstown population increased by 16,000. This transformed Bankstown from a rural town to a suburban town.

²⁴Suburb had important connotations of land, space and independence which were very attractive ideals to immigrants.²⁵

The suburb of Bankstown was created through the arrival of schools, churches, charities, and hospitals to provide services to the expanding population. However, infrastructure could not always keep up with the demand of people. In the early years, Bankstown council faced several crises relating to sewerage, improved transport, hospitals, and schools. These were overcome and by the 1950's Bankstown had the largest school in the southern hemisphere. This is indicative of the exponential growth of the area.

The increasing population radically changed the face of the Bankstown region. The composition of ethnicity in this area did not represent a homogeneous white Australia but rather a melting pot of many nationalities. This period is the beginning of multicultural Australia. An increase in the population also meant that there was a huge source of new consumers concentrated in one area. The growth of consumer markets in this area created a business boom.

²⁴ S. Rosen, Bankstown: A sense of Identity, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1996, p127

²⁵ I Burnley, P. Murphy and B. Fagan, Immigration and Australian Cities, Melbourne, Common Ground Publishing, 2000, p26

Conclusion

The Villawood Migrant Hostel is part of Sydney's rich tapestry of history. It has played an integral part in developing the multiculturalism Australia is proud of because of its relationship to so many Sydney migrants as their first home in Australia. The hardships the migrants endured in the basic nissen huts of Villawood must not be forgotten as it is a testament to their struggle to 'make it' in Australia.

The effect Villawood had on the local community was extraordinary. In the 80's, Bankstown was finally recognised as a city. This could surely not have been achieved without the population boost to the area from the Villawood Migrant Hostel.

Its use today as a Detention Centre reflects a changing attitude at a federal level concerning immigration. For this reason, the Villawood Migrant Hostel remains a dynamic part of Sydney's heritage whose history is constantly taking on new phases and new meanings.

For all of these reasons The Villawood Migrant Hostel is a significant site that demands critical study.

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Date: 1948

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Title: Three families, the Soriano family, the Alarcon family and the Serrano family listening to learn English records at the Villawood Migrant Hostel, Sydney. The families migrated from Spain.

Date: 1963

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Title: Westbridge Migrant Hostel British Flag, c. 1960's

Date: unknown

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Title: Westbridge Migrant Hostel Bassinette, c. 1950's – 1960's

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Title: Two families, the Soriano family and the Alarcon family, in the grounds of Villawood Migrant Hostel

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