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Sammy's Trattoria, Bar, Pizzeria (formerly Caffé Maximus) 64 Acland Street, St Kilda

In 1988, local architect Allan Powell (13) was commissioned to convert two existing shops here, built about 1920, into a stylish restaurant. It was arguably the first restaurant of any seriousness and style in St Kilda since Tolarno; 23 years earlier (17).

However, it should not be forgotten, that it was in Fitzroy Street, not Lygon Street, that in May 1954, Melbourne's first espresso café with a commercial espresso machine opened. This was Il Cappuccino at 61c Fitzroy Street. By the mid-seventies, it had closed.

Caffé Maximus has a façade flush with the shopfronts on either side, of sheer glistening black tiles in a mathematical grid with symmetrical openings punched in of elegant proportions. The name is inscribed in cobalt blue neon letters, slightly elongated. Overhead is a clock without numerals. The atmosphere is slightly Streamlined Moderne, comparable to the Prince of Wales when it opened in 1937, with its panels of gleaming black Vitrolite glass and stainless steel. At Caffé Maximus, the bar was placed centrally 'as the focus of activity' and the centre of attention.

Powell explains that the:

...essential attractions of a dining room include daylight, the "love" (sic) expressed in the craftsmanship, husbandry or care, of the cooks, the waiting staff and their activity and the subtle unconscious psychological relationships of distance from escape, dominance of over-view, removal from observation of activity, etc. At Maximus, the shiny black screen of the facade expresses 'the enticing unenterableness (sic) of a typical suburban shopfront to a child, potentially emblematic, a threshold dared to be coined a transitory barrier. Though the shiny blackness of Jean Cocteau's enterable mirror...

Powell is an architect of the utmost attention and thoughtfulness.

The façade is decorated with charming seaside shellfish creatures by local sculptor Peter D. Cole. Born in 1947 in Gawler, South Australia, Cole studied sculpture at the South Australian School of Art. He travelled, and taught sculpture at RMIT Bundoora. His cheery, colourful sculptures, of abstract or at least abstracted forms are visible in lobbies and forecourts around the CBD of Melbourne and elsewhere, such as those outside the Hamilton Art Gallery. The Caffé Maximus piece is early.

In his 1991 journal article, Allan Powell traces the lineage of his restaurant designs. He casts more than a glance over his shoulder back to the Florentino Grille and Cellar Bar, Bourke Street (renovated 1970-71 by Robin Boyd) and earlier to Jimmy Watson's Restaurant (now wine bar, 1961-63, also Robin Boyd). He also acknowledges the designs of the Society, Bourke Street and the Latin, Lonsdale Streets as 'institutionalised and proper' (both now sadly gone).

At Watson's, Powell recalls, Boyd remade the three former Victorian shops as a modernist design entity. Later at the Florentino, he respected the evidence of the former configuration, by leaving the polished plywood panel scars where the old café booths had been removed. However, he added exquisite scarlet glass light fittings by Vistosi of Murano, Venice.

Powell's first restaurant design was at the Metropole, High Street, Malvern (1982). He noted even only 20 years ago, that it was felt that a sense of luxuriousness implied commercialised insincerity. The Metropole was the first overt use of ornament, theatrically and imbued meaning in a Melbourne restaurant. Philip Johnson's The Four Seasons restaurant on 52nd Street, New York (1959) in the Seagram Building, with its entrance dominated by a large Picasso ballet design, was an inspiration for Powell.

He was concerned for a sense of privacy in the public realm and noted the corner pub quality, a place accessible to all family members; and of several small rooms, where members of the local community might meet by chance. Powell's design rejected reductionist authenticity, earthy colours and materials. He also considered orientation toward the sun during the day and the passage of the seasons.

These intelligent and sensitive observations which determined the direction that Powell's work was to take in St Kilda and its vicinity are important, because they have influenced so many characteristics of subsequent restaurants, cafés and bars, on or off Fitzroy Street, characteristics which are already taken for granted by the community.

At Dechezeaux, South Melbourne (1982), constrained by a tight budget, Powell achieved total exposure of the kitchen to diners (for the first time in Melbourne), who were lined up with high formality in a serried row of tables, backs to the wall.

Powell renovated the Latin in 1986, with a 'dreamlike' background colour of mid-grey, redolent of the forties with a spectacular centrepiece of a gleaming Futurist brass model of a gondola. Characteristic existing elements were retained and intervention minimised, similar to that more recently at the Prince. Powell explains the importance of atmosphere: 'the primary attraction of a restaurant. It is a party, which the patron pays to be admitted to... (in) suspended disbelief'. The Society Restaurant was also renovated in a similar manner in 1985.

Caffé Maximus (1988) followed, run by the 'revered' chef of the Latin, but in a casual bar style.

In the same year, Powell designed Café di Stasio, at 31A Fitzroy Street. Varied influences derived from St Kilda include a mock classical de Chiricio-like formal facade, with decorations and doorknobs Powell saw as kitsch-influenced. ‘Some of the garishness of Albert Tucker’s vision of St Kilda was intended’, he explained, ‘The big dipper falling away into an Antarctic winter’. His renovation of the Prince of Wales followed in 1998-99 (16).

In the mid 1980s, a civil engineer Donleavy Fitzpatrick, the developer of Donleavy’s restaurant, Armstrong Street, Middle Park in about 1978, the Vic Ave restaurant, the Smith Street Bar and Grill in Collingwood and the George and Seaview Hotels complex with the Melbourne Wine Room and Brooklawn all in Fitzroy Street, (18), finally bought the residential building pair Colombo Court and Harley Court at 54 and 56 Acland Street. In 1995, he told *The Age* of his ‘vivid memories of driving along the St Kilda foreshore and wondering why there weren’t more balconies, more rooftop gardens and more people on the streets, just enjoying life, the water and the elements’.

His objective, a small hotel with a licensed roof terrace, did not slot into existing planning and licensing legislation in Victoria. Sadly, in December 2002, Fitzpatrick was seriously ill with a second brain tumour and friends gathered at the Junction Football Oval to send him a message of hope and gratitude. When the illness was first reported in May 2002, Brian Kearney, director of Liquor Licensing, wrote to *The Age*:

The benefit that we all enjoy as a consequence of the diversity of licensed businesses in Victoria, including the bar scene, is very much a consequence of Don’s unrelenting challenging of the status quo of licensing law and policy in the early to mid-1990s... All in the industry owe a great debt to him.

It took the Nieuwenhuysen Report to create a new licence type, to enable Donleavy Fitzpatrick’s Dogs’ Bar to eventually open in 1988, as one of the first ‘licensed cafés’ in Victoria, rather than as the restaurant licence held by Maximus and Tolarno. It is difficult to credit that our ubiquitous café culture is all so remarkably recent.

Amongst the confetti of cafés and restaurants that followed in St Kilda, some are of architectural value: the George Public Bar designed by Grant Amon (the former Snake Pit, 1992) is one example. Also there is Termini (the former Victory Café), 60A Fitzroy Street, by Phillip Schemnitz; Luxe Restaurant and Bar, 15 Inkerman Street, by Neo-Metro Architects (1999); Sapore, 3 Fitzroy Street (1996), by the eclectic Tom Kovac. Then there is Wall Café, Nelson Street (cnr Carlisle Street, 1998) by the prolific sextet, Six Degrees Architects; Bortolotto’s Restaurant, Fitzroy Street, (cnr Park Street); Pelican, 16 Fitzroy Street; and the café in Carlisle Street, next to the St Kilda Library - a veritable deluge of exciting and convivial design, food and drink.

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