After Nightfall: Nightclubs in Melbourne 1983 to 1987

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PEER REVIEWED ESSAY

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Melbourne, like many other cities around the world, experienced an explosion of creativity through its nightlife in the late-twentieth century, which generated a profusion of fashion, music, architecture and communication design careers, collateral, and cultures. The nightclub was core to this proliferation, as an engine for cultural production, a fulcrum of social and economic bonds, and as an architectural typology of constantly creative reinvention. A brief period of nightclub design in Melbourne, Australia, from 1983–1987, in the context of the history of the nightclub, celebrates this building type, and the people that passed through it, as a force of creative energy.

The Nightclub Typology

The nightclub typology emerged out of live music venues in the 1950s where dancing to recorded music (vinyl records) occurred in existing venues including youth clubs, ballrooms, town halls, and other low-budget locations.[1] With the ascendance of recorded music in the late 1960s, dedicated spaces were created for dancing by converting former entertainment spaces, such as theatres, into discotheques, or with purpose-built facilities. Melbourne, like many cities, saw a move from civic buildings (like Box Hill, Beaumaris and Coburg Town Halls) to the newly built disco (such as Winston Charles in Prahran) or building conversions (Thumping Tum in the city centre). From its emergence in the late-60s, argues Alice Bucknell, "The nightclub has always been a fiercely creative and radical architectural typology." [2] She argues in her article "Do It, Do It Disco" that the nightclub is a utopian space where people can escape the norms of society by literally being separated from the outside world. In this nocturnal space, designers conjure a spectrum of materials (lighting, fashion, sound, graphics, architecture, and interior design) to shape the experience of the patron.

The nightclub is a total design that also relies on the patron being an active participant, or involved in the design of the interior experience. This is evident in the key programmatic move that makes the nightclub distinct from other twentieth-century entertainment venues after nightfall; no one was assigned a seat. As Roland Barthes observed in his review of the conversion of a Parisian theatre into the nightclub Le Palace, this lack of seating transforms the patron into a performer, "the whole theatre…is the stage."[3] At Le Palace, one could watch regular visitors like Yves Saint Laurent, Frédéric Mitterrand and Mick Jagger, or for its premier, Grace Jones singing "La Vie en Rose" atop a pink Harley Davidson. All of this happened among the public throng and not in front of it. The nightclub was therefore not just a place for dance; it became prominent in Western Europe as a multi-functional space for other forms of cultural expression. Italian radical group Gruppo 9999 described the nightclub as "a home for everything, from rock music, to theatre, to visual arts."[4] (Some people only needed to shake their hips to become part of the performance.) Nightclubs allowed youth culture to express itself and were "safe spaces for populations whose lives were marginalized in the daylight,"[5] including places of employment and creative output. The nightclub was, and is, an engine of culture which gives form and space to disenfranchised and marginalised communities.

The design of the club was not only dependent on the crowd but also on those who controlled its up-to-date technology dedicated to a night of pleasure: recorded music, hydraulics, lasers, holographic projectors, and pharmaceuticals. This technological layer contributes to the temporality of the nightclub that architecture historian Tom Wilkinson refers to as its typological melancholy[6] because the convergence of those technological conditions—light, sound, drugs—is fleeting, mere seconds, even if some clubs are open all night or weekend long. (In tandem, some club nights and venues last for a season or a few years.) The temporal conditions also generate distortions: a hallucinatory clarity is enabled by a strobe in an artificial darkness that otherwise hides what could not be shown in broad daylight. Technology expands self-consciousness.

Nightclubs are celebrated as spaces of self-identification and places that challenge architectural conventions; they have been characterised as sites of socio-political experimentation that challenge societal privilege and power.[7] But the nightclub is also a commercial enterprise. The explosion of continuous recorded music for the dancefloor in the 1970s catapulted the nightclub into a mainstream institution. The soundtrack of the club, disco, became a genre in its own right, fuelled by the film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the mythical status of nightclub Studio 54 that opened in that same year. Facsimiles of

Preceding Pages
Inflation nightclub interior, 1985, architects, Biltmoderne for Inflation Caberet Holdings, photographer John Gollings, courtesy John Gollings ©2023 John Gollings.

Opposite
Poster advertising Inflation nightclub, 1983, designer, Robert Pearce for Inflation Caberet Holdings, RMIT Design Archives, Robert Pearce Collection ©2023 Anne Shearman.

New-York-style clubs popped up elsewhere: Disco Disco in Hong Kong (1978), Inflation in Melbourne (1979) and Mirano Continental in Brussels (1981). Nightclubs were everywhere. The launch of Inflation (alongside The Underground) at the end of the 1970s announced the arrival of the nightclubbing era to Melbourne. It was an import of New York's Studio 54 with a "high-tech sheen with stainless steel."[8] This was no coincidence. Inflation co-owner Sam Frantzeskos visited the New York City mecca to seek inspiration.[9] The mainstream success of the discotheque highlights the danger of romanticising the era through its cultural veneer that challenged the status quo through fashion, music and design. Being radical does not mean one is progressive. The nightclub has been a site of excessive entrepreneurialism exploiting youth consumption. An even harsher critique came from architect Nigel Coates who described nightclubs as a "social safety valve for turning transgressive forces loose."[10] According to Coates, the nightclub became a pacifier as political struggles did not shift into this social domain.

Subcultures, and the nightclubs that contain them, are sites of contradictions. They are inclusive and exclusive, egalitarian and elite, resistant and submissive. They are a place to perform your identity and a place to get lost in the masses and submit to the big throbbing baseline. They loosen social relations to solidify them into something anew. And this spectrum of experiences has been evident in the documentation of clubbing culture that has been captured in an explosion of Western European exhibitions over the last decade: *Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy 1975–1975*, ICA (2015–2016); *Energy Flash–The Rave Moment*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp (2016); *La Boite de Nuit*, Villa Noailles, Hyères (2017); and *Night Fever: Designing Club Culture 1960–Today*, Vitra Design Museum, Weil Am Rhein (2018). The references in these exhibitions are overly familiar in architectural and club circles: Piper, Berghain, The Hacienda, Studio 54; all from North America and Europe. There is seldom a reference to projects on the continents of Asia, Africa, South America, and Oceania. In response, this paper offers three projects from Melbourne.

Downtown: The Reinvention of Inflation

Melbourne's contribution to the design of nightclubs in the late-twentieth century kicks off with the renaissance of Inflation Nightclub, which Sam and George Frantzeskos opened in November 1979 inspired by Studio 54 in New York. They decided to give it a reboot after it began attracting "a largely suburban bank clerk crowd" in the early '80s.[11] The 1985 fit-out of the interior was hidden behind an interwar neoclassical facade designed by architect Marcus Barlow in 1938 at 54–60 King Street in what was at that time

Opposite
Inflation nightclub interior, 1985, architects, Biltmoderne for Inflation Caberet Holdings, photographer John Gollings, courtesy John Gollings ©2023 John Gollings.

Left
Cover of Jenny Bannister Lookbook 2: 1984–1985, creator Jenny Bannister, c. 1987, RMIT Design Archives, Jenny Bannister Collection © 2023 Jenny Bannister.

the warehouse district of Melbourne; by the 1980s King Street was well on its way to becoming the centre of the city's nightlife. Inflation was unique due to the combined chutzpah of its three designers, Dale Jones Evans, Randal Marsh and Roger Wood, who had established their practice Biltmoderne in 1983 when they were architecture students at RMIT.[12] Nightclub design has often been an experimental field for emerging architecture and design collectives. In Italy alone in a space of six years from 1966 to 1972, several clubs opened at the hands of Italian radical design collectives: Piper (Pietro Derossi, Giorgio Ceretti, Riccardo Rosso, Turin, 1966), L'Altro Mondo (Gruppo Strum, Rimini, 1967), Barbarella (Studio65, Turin, 1972) and Bamba Issa (Gruppo UFO, Forte dei Marmi, 1969). The collective structure of designing a club highlighted: two architects equal a partnership; three makes a poly party.

Like the architects of Italian radical design, Biltmoderne saw the nightclub as a site of multidisciplinary experimentation and creative liberation. The 1985 renovation across the club's three floors was radical in contrast to the status quo promulgated in mainstream architectural discourse at the time. The project was described in abrasive terms in a 1987 review by Justin Henderson in Interiors who wrote that it was "Idiosyncratic, aggressive, arty, threatening... Hard surfaces and hard edges define Inflation's style."[13] Entering on the ground floor, a black-and-white terrazzo desk greeted the patron. Behind this, four television monitors displayed the happenings in the four main areas of the club (the ground-floor restaurant, basement dancefloor, first-floor bar, and video lounge). Checking the coat, one then passed through a self-standing, blue-tiled portal through which party-goers entered into the cafe where they could lean against the clear curved cafe countertop, with crushed safety-glass underneath, up-lit by a sinuous neon light.

A central steel staircase connected the three floors. Ascending, one arrived at the first-floor video bar, dancefloor and lounge. Fins protruded from the ceiling to mark the separation the bar and the dancefloor; they contained dichroic lights that shot out warm and cold colours to mark this threshold. On the dancefloor, a grand video screen framed like a painting and roped off, was positioned at one end. At the edge of the dancefloor were six Riverina granite island tables with 'nibbled' edges, some penetrated with spikes (Henderson thought the "roughly shaped points on the thick island bar poles" were "aggressive") which were smeared with hammertone paint to give a greasy effect.[14] Going down to the basement, a large tiled floor with a pixelated pattern in purple, blue and white, ran up the bar. More greasy poles spiked out at the edge of the main dancefloor, which added to the overall feeling of idiosyncratic *Mad Max* imagery of "axe-heads,

THE HARDWARE CLUB
WEDNESDAYS 9:30PM TIL LATE
HARDWARE CLUB HARDWARE HOUSE HARDWARE LANE MELBOURNE

spears and contorted steel" and a bunker-like door entry to the DJ booth.[15] This dystopic design reflected Melbourne's city centre at this time, which was a wasteland after dark inhabited only by its uninhibited and playful youth.

The nightclub also reflected an ascendant queer culture in Melbourne at the cusp of the AIDS epidemic. This is not only due to the club providing a place of leisure and employment for the LGBTQI+ community,[16] but also a place of queer expression. This is evident in Inflation's graphic identity, the work of graphic designer and fashion illustrator Robert Pearce who collaborated with Biltmoderne on a number of projects in the mid-80s. (*Crowd* magazine had published an article on Pearce in 1983 where he presented himself as openly gay; in 1984 he founded the Fashion Design Council (FDC) with Robert Buckingham and Kate Durham.) Queerness could also be located in the design of the nightclub uniforms that had overt BDSM references. Designed by Jenny Bannister after winning a competition held by the Fashion Design Council,[17] the bar staff wore aprons in hospital blue and green while the bouncer received special attention with two outfits: one with overalls "reminiscent of a surgical suit. A roomy balaclava and mittens";[18] the other was a full-length doctor's coat for those bouncers that were more restrained.[19] A queerness to Inflation can also be located in its design that critiqued and disrupted normative architectural conventions. Across the three floors, each element was exaggerated, energetic, foreboding, and ruthlessly designed. Randal Marsh remarked: "Like music, the design should surround and overwhelm the viewer."[20] This fitout at Inflation, and its nexus with fashion, illustration and graphic design, was unlike any other.

Not only was the nightclub a site of multidisciplinary and creative liberation, it was also a site of design entrepreneurialism that was key to Biltmoderne. They were part of "Melbourne's young entrepreneurial sub-culture of prime movers in music, photography, film, art, design and particularly fashion which is manifested in, amongst other outlets, the Fashion Design Council and the now defunct *Crowd* and *Collections* magazines."[21] This was uncommon for architects at that time who were actively discouraged by the Australian Institute of Architects for advertising their services. Biltmoderne was an architecture practice with attitude, and the Inflation fit-out announced their arrival in the profession receiving a 1985 Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Victoria) Award for New Commercial Building.

Down a Lane: The Hardware Club

The revision of the nightclub in the twenty-first century in architectural discourse has neglected many designers outside the transatlantic axis, including the contribution of Biltmoderne. It also neglected spaces transformed through scenography, the act of design to create a space of performance. The combination of interior elements, from murals to furniture, can also have a transformative impact upon the design of the nightclub. This reaffirms design as a creative force to shape experiences rather than shaping objects alone as was evident in the brief interlude of The Hardware Club.

The Hardware Club, at 43 Hardware Lane, in the centre of the city opened on August 3, 1983 and reigned for two-and-a-half years "as an elitist mecca"[22] as one needed a membership to enter. Membership, however, was forced on the club owners as Hardware House had been the social club of Melbourne's hardware retailers and workers since the mid-1890s and one needed to be a member to enter the premises. In the 1980s, restricted licensing laws closed Melbourne's bars at 1am and food had to be served but members clubs could keep their doors open 24 hours; and the Hardware Club would often operate until 8am. New memberships (at an annual fee of $10) were at first not easy to obtain, which reiterates the notion of the nightclub as a site of inclusion through some exclusion.

Hardware was set up by Jules Taylor, Paul Jackson and Andrew Maine (who worked together at radio station 3RRR) with Robert Pearce as its graphic designer. It held 300 people over two floors (although it originally was held upstairs only). Ascending the stairs patrons were greeted with an interior of "80s modern style"[23] with a Keith Haring mural. Room dividers on castors separated (and expanded) the dancefloor from the lounge area. These elements were designed by Jane Joyce, co-founder of *Crowd* magazine which was part of the design and communication practice of Joyce, Michael Trudgeon and Andrew Maine. Joyce was commissioned after winning a mini competition, which included contestants Michael Trudgeon and Macgregor Knox.

The club was a snapshot in the evolution of subcultures and new musical genres that responded to changing cultural tastes of its time, when the disco genre was knocked from its throne. This is evident in the Hardware playlist, which included Herbie Hancock, Heaven 17, Donna Summer and Tom Tom Club,[24] a list that indicated a broader cultural shift where commercial disco splintered into many musical genres: High NRG and Italo disco, with the relentless tempo and treble, gave way to post-disco, electro, synth-pop, freestyle, and r'n'b. Despite this avant-garde taste, in a short time, by 1986 Hardware went "hairdresser suburban and gay" because, as founder Jules Taylor remarked "its charm had been lost because it became open to anyone."[25] Like the rebooted Inflation, the Hardware Club suffered from its popularity. This is the typological sadness of the club: its coolness is fleeting.

Uptown: Metro

The Frantzeskos brothers sold Inflation in 1986 around the same time as the Hardware Club closed. On November 25, 1987, they launched their new club Metro in the former Brennans Amphitheatre in uptown Bourke Street, which had been designed by Eaton & Bates with Nahum Barnet in 1912 and had been adapted over the twentieth century. Bourke Street is the retail hub of Melbourne but also, near Spring street where the Metro was, the theatre district. This new renovation continued the relationship of the Frantzeskos brothers with Biltmoderne who, with a budget of ten million dollars (the lighting alone had a budget of one million dollars), transformed the former theatre.[26] And, once again, the club's graphic identity was in the hands of Robert Pearce.

Opposite
Poster advertising the Hardware Club, 1983, designer Robert Pearce, RMIT Design Archives, Robert Pearce Collection ©2023 Anne Shearman.

Above
Metro nightclub interior, 1988, architects, Biltmoderne, photographer John Gollings, courtesy John Gollings ©2023 John Gollings.

Biltmoderne transformed the stalls into the dancefloor, the dress circle into a viewing platform while the gods was a separate bar and bandroom. In this programmatic switch, like the clubs before it, the audience became actors.

Rather than erase the traces of former spaces, the existing forms of the circles were accentuated with polished steel walkways, stairs and platforms that projected from them towards the dancefloor. And like Inflation, there was a clash of materials and textures: copper, marble, granite, stainless stee,l and timber. This was also contrasted to some of the heritage elements, with the architects restoring "the original Hollywood-esque interior of gold-leafed Friezes, embossed cameos, plaster garlands and elaborate staircases as the basis for their scheme"[27] and retaining the "old foyers, balconies, domed ceiling and the top of the proscenium."[28] Like Inflation, technology became an architectural element: a video wall of twenty-five large television monitors towered on the stage. Robot-arm metal towers with lighting trusses loomed over the dancefloor.[29] Consumerism also took a prime position. To the front on the ground floor was a "dispensary—a shop which sells special in-house merchandise such as t-shirts, watches and posters. it also stocks the basic paraphernalia for serious club goers, such as headache tablets, mouth sprays, combs, hair and beauty products, condoms and perfume!"[30] Creative energy depends upon cultural consumption. The opening, attended by over 2,400 people, was a multimedia extravaganza. It was broadcast on national television station Channel Ten which described the "spectacle of lighting and video artistry with a guest list of 'Australian media, industry leaders, politicians, radio and television personalities, sports stars, music and film celebrities, the fashionable and the demi-monde.'"[31]

This brief interlude of nightclubbing in Melbourne from 1983 to 1987 reinforces the notion of the nightclub typology as a place of creative experimentation. The designs of Inflation, Metro and the Hardware Club, through physical and technological infrastructure, stimulated new experiences that shifted normative values of design. These projects also demonstrated that entrepreneurialism was core to their propulsion. The history of the nightclub is a capitalistic treadmill of reinvention: styles change, nightclubs morph. As one club shuts its doors, another opens. It was a window of cultural hedonism in Melbourne before the recession of the late-1980s that would set in for several years.

This article stems from an entry the author wrote on Inflation nightclub for the anthology *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* (2022) published by the Royal Institute of British Architecture.

Endnotes

1 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (New York: Wiley, 1995).

2 Alice Bucknell, “Do It, Do It Disco,” *Metropolis*, 37, 9, (2018): 152.

3 Roland Barthes, “At Le Palace Tonight,” *Vogue Hommes*, (May 1978).

4 Bucknell, “Do It, Do It Disco,” 154.

5 Lawrence Chua, “Night Fever: Designing Club Culture, 1960–Today,” *The Journal of Architecture*, 24, no. 1 (2019): 134.

6 Tom Wilkinson, “Typology: Nightclub,” *The Architectural Review*, Issue 1470 (April 2020).

7 See Ivan L. Munuera, “Palladium,” in *Queer Spaces: An atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories*, eds. Adam Nathaniel Furman and Joshua Mardell (London: RIBA, 2022), 136–137; Marco Fusinato, Felciity Scott and Mark Wasiuta, *La Fine del Mondo* (New York City: Rainoff, 2014).

8 Andrew Maine, “Feet First,” *Crowd*, 1 (1983): 39.

9 Paul Fleckney, *Techno Shuffle: Rave Culture and The Melbourne Underground* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2018), 29.

10 Neil Coates, “New Clubs at Large,” *AA Files*, 1 (1981–82): 4.

11 Andrew Maine, “Feet First,” 39.

12 Biltmoderne’s design practice grew out of their early work creating furniture and exhibitions. Their first major exhibition of furniture was *X-hibition* (1983) with Jane Joyce at Christine Abrahams Gallery. This included *Lounge Suite* collected by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1986.

13 Justin Henderson, “At Inflation, a Nightlub in Melbourne,” *Interiors*, 12 (1987): 59.

14 “Inflation: Biltmoderne Puts a Hard Edge on Hedonism,” *Design World*, 9 (1986): 60.

15 Paul Morgan, “Zeitgeist Comes to King Street,” *Transition*, 4, 4 (1986): 17–21.

16 Over its lifespan, Inflation has hosted a variety of LGBTIQ+ nights, including Get Down, Gay Night, Climax, Winterdaze, Beyond, Trough Faggot Party, John, Honcho Disko, Barba and Adam.

17 Robyn Healy, “High Risk Dressing by the Collective Known as the Fashion Design Council of Australia,” in *The Design Collective: An Approach to Practice*, eds. Harriet Edquist and Laurene Vaughan (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 157.

18 Kay O’Sullivan, “The Post Mortem? It’s a Success,” *The Age*, June 5, 1985, 20.

19 The attention to fashion was also evident in the crowd at Inflation: some adorned in designs by Martin Grant, Kara Baker, Sara Thorn, Bruce Slorach, and Fiona Scanlan.

20 Biltmoderne, “Biltmoderne Interviews Biltmoderne,” *Transition*, 4, 4 (1986): 16.

21 Paul Morgan, “Zeitgeist Comes to King Street,” 19.

22 Wendy Harmer, “Death of a Hardwearing Legend,” *The Age* (EG: Entertainment Guide), January 31, 1986.

23 Andrew Maine, “Feet First,” 39.

24 Andrew Maine, “Feet First,” 39.

25 Wendy Harmer, “Death of a Hardwearing Legend.”

26 Fleckney, *Techno Shuffle*, 43.

27 Press release for the opening of the ‘Metro’ nightclub, designer Robert Pearce, copywriter, Robert Buckingham, RMIT Design Archives, Robert Pearce Collection

28 Graeme Butler, *Palace Theatre, Bourke Street, Melbourne: Heritage Assessment for the City of Melbourne 2014* (Melbourne: City of Melbourne, 2014), 14.

29 Buckingham, “A Revolution in Nightlife: Melbourne Metro Nightclub.”

30 Buckingham, “A Revolution in Nightlife: Melbourne Metro Nightclub.”

31 Buckingham, “A Revolution in Nightlife: Melbourne Metro Nightclub.”