



WORKS ON PAPER, WORKS ON SCREEN

RECALIBRATING HIERARCHIES OF PEOPLE, BUILDINGS AND LAND IN
TOORAK HOUSE AND THE MELBOURNE CLUB

THE IAN POTTER MUSEUM OF ART MIEGUNYAH STUDENT PROJECT AWARD 2019 CAMERON HURST, DOMINIQUE TANG

This report is the outcome of a 2019 Miegurnah Student Project Award, and is the result of independent research undertaken by the students.

In a collaboration between our respective disciplines of Architecture and Art History, we created a virtual reality (VR) artwork as a tool for engaging with two mid-nineteenth century works from the Ian Potter's Russel and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' collection: Toorak by Conrad Martens (fig. 1) and The Melbourne Club by Arthur Wilmore (fig. 2).¹ Historical interpretation of the artworks became the reference and inspiration for a virtual architecture. Abstract, theoretical debates of art history centered on questions of the aesthetic ontologies of Australia's colonial nation-state were made tangible for a lecture audience by being built into an immersive digital space. Participants in Works on Paper, Works on Screen are actively implicated in the ways of seeing and knowing place in Naarm/ Melbourne, and asked to consider how formal qualities of artworks are linked to particular logics.

¹ Conrad Martens, Toorak, 1860. Watercolour and tempera on paper, 44.4cm x 64.6cm. Melbourne, the Ian Potter Museum of Art; Arthur Wilmore, The Melbourne Club, 1862. Engraving, 20.7cm x 22.9cm. Melbourne, the Ian Potter Museum of Art.



Figure 1.
Conrad Martens, Toorak, 1860. Watercolour and
tempera on paper, 44.4cm x 64.6cm. Melbourne, the
Ian Potter Museum of Art.



Figure 2.
Arthur Wilmore, The Melbourne Club, 1862. Engraving,
20.7cm x 22.9cm. Melbourne, the Ian Potter Museum
of Art.

Toorak from 1860 is a watercolour painting by the popular artist Conrad Martens depicting Toorak House, a stately home which served as the unofficial Government house during the early years of the colony. A trio of genteel figures populate the bright white facade of the building. Bush, textured with arabic gum, is a frame for the glowing picture of civil activity. The Melbourne Club, from 1862, is an engraving of the eponymous elite mens' club on Collins Street published in the series Victoria Illustrated. A Renaissance-style building designed by Leonard Terry, the Club is shown from a slightly raised perspective as a space of rigid, impenetrable order. A previous researcher of the Miegunyah Collection, Henry Skerritt, noted that many works in the Miegunyah collection 'contain a strong element of propaganda, of the civilising and taming effect of a cultured society on what is previously 'empty' country.'³ This resonates with both works we researched, which present a vision of Victoria as a thriving metropolis where bustling British subjects animate gleaming buildings. There is no visual evidence of the continued sovereignty of the Kulin nations.

It was striking researching the artworks as a product of a colony that had only existed for 25 years. Despite the picture of harmony and civilised accord found in Toorak and The Melbourne Club, accounts of Naarm/ Melbourne during this period tell a story of immense violence and chaos. There was constant conflict between the Settlers at large and the Kulin nations, who were fighting to assert their Sovereign relation to the land.⁴ The Settlers were also a disparate group with multiple warring factions, resulting in constant clashes between the conflicting interests of squatters, mercantile bankers and the bourgeoisie British political class.⁵ Disease ran rampant through the city's dirt roads. The trajectory of Naarm/ Melbourne changed forever, however, after the discovery of gold in 1851.⁶ By the 1960s, the era of unprecedented gold rush growth that transformed the colony into a major industrial metropolis nicknamed 'Marvellous Melbourne' was accelerating exponentially.

² John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 157.

³ ibid 142

⁴ Giordano Nanni and Andrea James, Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2013), 6-8.5

⁵ Robert William Connell and Terence H. Irving, Class Structure in Australian History: Poverty and Progress (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992), 86-87.

⁶ John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 3.

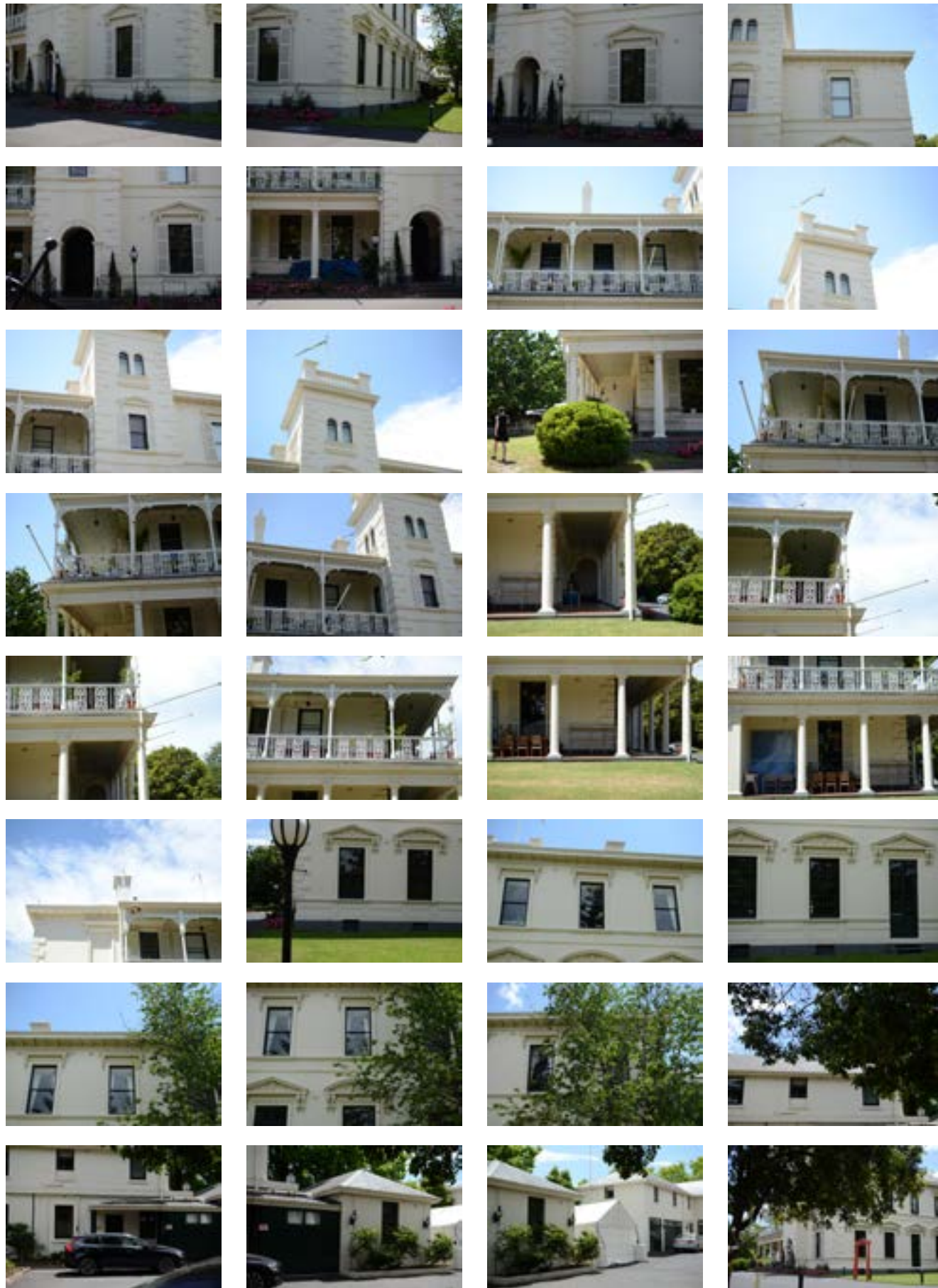
As such, Toorak and The Melbourne Club were created during what can be considered a pivot point for the colony, where the chaotic violence of the first two decades of colonisation became subsumed into a burgeoning state bureaucracy with a sheen of ambitious international aspiration. The NGV was founded in 1861, indicating a concerted desire towards developing a sophisticated arts culture in the new colony.⁷ Toorak and The Melbourne Club are generative documents for considering how particular Settlers wished to represent the colony during the mid-19th century informed by the ontological frameworks that underpinned the colonial project.⁸

Interestingly, both works have a process of mechanical reproduction between the original site and the final artwork: Conrad Martens never visited Melbourne and as such most likely painted Toorak from a photograph, and the process of engraving in The Melbourne Club is by nature reproductive. Our research turned to this question: what processes of transformation could occur between the original sites of Toorak House and the Melbourne Club, and representations of them? Additionally, what ways of knowing underpin particular ways of seeing?⁹ Dominique's work on the VR experimented with the idea that photographic documentation can ever be truly neutral through using photogrammetry software to create an artwork with new and potentially different ontologies than the original artworks from the Miegunyah collection.

⁷ Henry Skerritt, Not-so-Marvellous Melbourne: Anxiety on the urban frontier in the art of ST. Gill, Henry Skerritt, published May 1 2015, <https://henryfskerritt.com/category/blog/>.

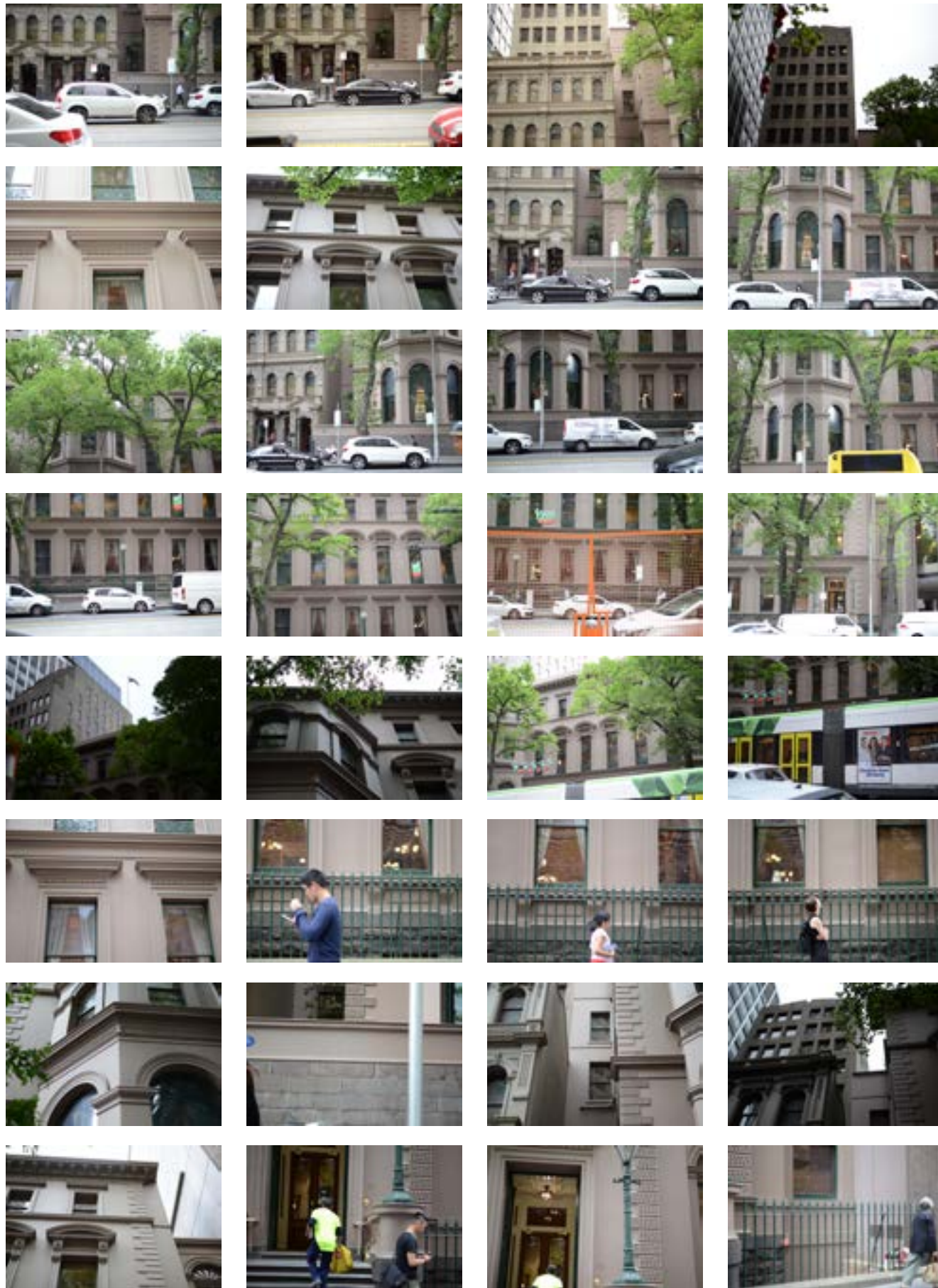
⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii. This research was informed by the framework of the 'white possessive' outlined by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, wherein ontologies of patriarchal capitalist Settler colonialism fundamentally structure relations in the nation-state 'Australia.' Moreton-Robinson instead prioritises the need for Settlers to become subjects of Indigenous Sovereignty, wherein logics of relationality and reciprocal engagement with the Land are centered.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Wiley: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 1239; John Berger *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 2008.



Photographic construction of Toorak





Photographic construction of The Melbourne Club





The VR is a virtual space where the same subjects of Toorak and The Melbourne Club are rearranged in an immersive scene showing the buildings enlarged and stretched, dissolving as a participant moves throughout the space. The buildings of colonial power are transformed into a digital facade comprised of thousands of points, constructed from photographs gathered from site visits to Toorak House and the Melbourne Club. Participants move through a virtual space that disturbs normative boundaries of interior or exterior space or organic or built space, wherein a rigid disconnect between people, buildings and land is softened and destabilised.¹⁰ The cloud of points disintegrate the structural logic of the architecture, while colours from the plaster formwork, tree bark and bitumen road all merge into each other. As the user steps back and skirts the boundaries of the virtual scene they are at the furthest point away from the digital field, and the frozen subjects of Toorak and The Melbourne Club unflatten, the distortion of the subjects

are revealed. This manifests in unpredictable ways: openings in windows and doors are now distinguished from shadows, and columns lean at impossible angles. This warped space works to problematise the VR as a neutral way of seeing, which in itself as a technology is informed with a distinct set of ontologies, norms and pre-formed notions of the roles of buildings in relation to people and land.

Walkthrough video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g7Jbab8Gzs>

¹⁰ Antoine Picon, *Smart Cities: a Spatialised Intelligence* (Melbourne: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 189.

The historian Lynette Russell notes that ‘when frontiers and boundaries are examined closely they seem to melt away.’¹¹ Toorak and The Melbourne Club are artworks deeply concerned with asserting frontiers and boundaries that assert the successes of inchoate Marvellous Melbourne, predicated on the assertion of terra nullius. Through re-envisioning the same sites through our VR artwork as a form of psychogeography wherein participants experienced strict borders ‘melting’ or dissolving away, we engage tentatively with destabilising the dominant narrative of Naarm/ Melbourne’s colonial history as represented in 19th century artworks. Re-envisioning the same sites through our VR artwork allowed participants to engage with the way in which photographic documentation positions dominant narratives, specifically that of Naarm/ Melbourne’s early colonial history, as neutral. Our VR artwork facilitates a contemporary engagement with the 19th century works in Miegunyah collection as a starting point to explore narratives of occupying and representing space and place.

¹¹ Lynette Russell, *Colonial Frontiers: Indigenous-European Encounters in Settler Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 11-12.

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