

Why is Smith Street Important?

*Speaker Box Series, Suede Bar, Smith Street, Collingwood,
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1) Introduction

- What I will do today is talk for about half an hour on the history of Smith Street to highlight the significant milestones in the history of the street. Then after this perhaps we can open it up for general discussion. I am sure others would be interested to hear any stories or historical insights that you may have about the street or even where you think it may be headed.

2) The 19th Century

- Smith Street is one of Melbourne's oldest thoroughfares dating back to the first suburban land subdivision in Melbourne in 1838. Smith Street forms the eastern border of Fitzroy, Melbourne's first suburb, and the western border of Collingwood and we stand about 3 Kilometres from Melbourne's centre. At first Smith Street split the suburb of Collingwood in two but then the eastern half of the suburb was named Newtown and then later, Fitzroy.
- Smith Street originally formed part of a winding dirt track that went to Heidelberg. It was the only road out of the city into the north eastern district of the fledgling Victorian colony. Smith Street was later straightened when the area was surveyed for the city's first subdivision and land sales and became Melbourne's first suburban shopping strip. In Victorian times it was one the busiest and most important shopping centres in all the Australian colonies. And in Melbourne it was only rivalled by Chapel Street in Prahran.

3) Establishment of Foy and Gibsons

- Between 1837 and 1865 Smith Street underwent a transition from a thoroughfare to a manufacturing, service and shopping centre.
- One of the greatest manufacturing and retail outlets of the time was the massive Foy and Gibson's complex which has at the time the largest factory in the Southern Hemisphere.
- This is perhaps the first example of a purpose built department store in Australia and was completed during the boom years of 1891.
- Most of the Foy Building were built by the renowned Melbourne architect William Pitt who favouring the Gothic style, he was responsible for many well-known buildings including the Federal Coffee Palace, the Melbourne Stock Exchange, the original Rialto building, St. Kilda and Brunswick town halls, and the Victoria brewery in Victoria Parade. He also designed many theatres and re-designed the Princess Theatre in 1888

4) Fitzroy side of the street (I believe that this is the Ladies store)

- And I read an entry from the book Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb.
- "Foy and Gibson, the first modern department store in Victoria, was a Smith Street institution for over a century. Founded in 1850 by a dour Scot, William Gibson, the store rapidly expanded so that by the early 1990s Foy and Gibson was present on both sides of Smith Street, and the famous Gibsonia factories sprawled across three entire blocks of Collingwood. This immense emporium on the Fitzroy side of Smith Street was opened in 1912 about the time the photograph was taken, but,

like most businesses along the street, it suffered during the 1920s with the drift of retailing to the city. The premises were converted to a specialist furniture store in 1928. In 1955 the entire retail business of Foy and Gibson was taken over by Cox Brothers, another retail firm with origins in Fitzroy (Brunswick Street).

5) Contemporary shot Ladies Store

6) Macs Hotel

- Mac's Hotel, which also played an important role in the history of the area, occupied the site of numbers 168-172 Smith Street from about 1860. The only surviving part is number 168, the southern third of the original building. As a writer of the time noted:
- 'very remarkable was Macs hotel at 168 Smith Street. It was the focus of many of the agitations by which the Collingwoodites used to be convulsed. It was the headquarters of Stumperdom, for there was an open space in front, and an open space in rear, where the great mass of meeting used to be held....A roaring trade in rum and two ales used to be driven at the Tavern bar where the calls were incessant on stump night''.

Perhaps also played a role in the 8 hour movement.

7) Cable Tram

- This is what a cable tram looks like in case you haven't seen one.

8)

- Looking down Smith Street from Johnson Street so this must be the Birmingham on the right there.

9)

- Looking down Johnson Street from the corner of Smith Street: Does any one notice anything unusual about this image....Johnson Street has trams...

10) 1900 to 1970

- The period of 1900 to 1970 is another major period in the history of Smith Street as there was the expansion of Foy and Gibson's, a Tunnel was built under Smith Street, Coles Started its first store and World War II saw the fortunes of Smith Street start to subside.

11) Foy and Gibson at it height

- I love this Image this is a picture of Foy and Gibson at it height in the early 19th Century. Foy's manufactured as well as sold their goods which I am sure the ACCC would have something to say about today.

12)

- Postcard of Smith Street with the large **Foy and Gibson** store dominating. There is an elaborate trellis facade built over the verandah, the blinds are drawn against the sun, and signs on every section of the verandah announce the Foy & Gibson Summer Fair. Women in Edwardian dress cross the manure strewn road, men gossip next to their delivery carts, carriages wait outside the shop and several cyclists proceed along the street. To the north of **Foy and Gibson** are Mrs Holland's millinery, the Grace Darling Hotel, Robert Hurst's boot shop, Leonard Cooper and Company ironmongers, and Robert Davis draper.

13)

- This is Smith Street out side of Foy's during the Christmas Shopping period. ...Trams go in both directions, elegantly dressed women hurry back and forth across the road and the kerbs are lined with horses and carriages.

14)

- Shows **Foy and Gibson's** at the time of their summer fair. The shot is angled so that more can be seen of the Fitzroy side of Smith Street, including the Union Bank of Australia. A number of larrikins stand on the road, hanging about; while ladies in elaborate Edwardian hats walk along the paths or travel in a cable tram. Several covered carriages wait outside **Foy and Gibson's**.
- And what do you do to keep the Ladies away from the Larrikins?

15) The Tunnel

- This is the only picture I could find of the tunnel and this is a recent shot taken by Miles Lewis. It was opened in 1911.
- It is from the West Side of the Street and shows the pressed metal ceiling, a tiled wall on the right, and a modern brick wall has been built in the centre at a later date.

16)

- These are some shoppers underneath the awnings at Foys so you have some indication of how busy the street was and how much of a fasionable place it was to be seen and to shop.
- This photo was taken near **Foy and Gibson's** who are advertising a toy fair, perhaps explaining the large number of children (dressed in sailor suits and straw hats) accompanying the elegantly dressed men and women.

17)

- This is another image of Smith Street during a quiet period. The **Foy and Gibson** shop on the Fitzroy side can also be seen, along with two banks. On the street are a cable tram and several carriages, while women in large hats proceed along the footpath.

18) The Establishment of GJ Coles

- In 1914 the first G & J Coles variety store opened in Collingwood, Victoria, employing six staff. Exterior photo of George James **Coles** first store at 288 Smith Street with large signs above and below the verandah. The store opened on 9 April 1914 with nothing over a shilling, and marked the beginning of a major change to retailing as the store displayed merchandise for customers to see and handle

without any obligation to buy. It was also the beginning of a major empire of 900 stores throughout Australia (so this was like the first \$2 shop). In the mid-1930s, the building was re-modelled to the design of Harry Norris. Norris was amongst the most prolific and prominent architects of the Art Deco era in Melbourne and designed a range of commercial, industrial and domestic buildings.

19) Artists Impression of the Coles Store

20) The Interior of the First Coles

- Before this type of retailing customers would have to go to the shopkeeper and ask him or her to get the goods for them from the shelf; sort of like a milkbar works.

21)

- This is what it look like now. Where the butcher is, this is the remaining third of Macs Hotel and the other bit is what remains of Coles. You can see the COLES sign above the awning today. It stopped being a Coles in the 1960s.

22) Recent History: 1970s to the Present

- By the 1970s Smith Street was pretty much in decline and there was much demolition in Smith Street and the Collingwood and Fitzroy areas. There was the replacement of what was seen as 'slum housing' with high rise apartments and then there has been the recent gentrification of the street.
- And I will quote from a report by John Fitzgerald et.al on the Heroin Trade in Smith Street that they produced for Vic Health and The Uni of Melbourne.
- ... (tensions in Smith Street) have changed little in the past 120 years. It is an area that socially and physically houses tension between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Smith Street, as a main central thoroughfare operates as a conduit for these physical and social changes. That is, people, classes and demographics move through it and out to other places. This is a key to understanding the inherent tensions in and around Smith Street, located as it is in the centre of what has always been a set of rarely harmonious, always changing, contested spaces".

23)

- I had trouble finding illustrative recent pictures so here is a picture of the residents response to the building of the F19 freeway through their suburb in 1977.

24) And here is a picture of the freeway

25)

- And this is a picture of the demolition in progress to make way for the Atherton Gardens Estate in Fitzroy.

26) Federal Coffee Palace (Front)

- And just to give you a sense of some of the building that were destroyed during this period here is perhaps the most significant one of them all. The Federal Coffee Palace that was built 1888 by William Pitt and was on the corner of King and Collins Street. It was a 600 room hotel and one of the grandest Victorian buildings ever built in Melbourne. It was pulled down in the 1973 to build a low rise building and a car park.

27) Federal Coffee Palace (interior)

- This is the interior. It was called a 'coffee palace' and not a hotel because it was built during the temperance movement of the late 19th Century when certain people were worried about alcoholism.

28)

- To briefly conclude perhaps the most significant features of the history of Smith Street is the role that it has played in the history of retailing and also that it has always been at the cross roads of some of the extremes in Melbourne between the have and have not and this is one of the most important factors in what makes up the diversity of the district.