Eileen Chanin, *Capital Designs: Australia House and Visions of an Imperial London*


In *Capital Designs: Australia House and Visions of an Imperial London*, Eileen Chanin explains that, ‘Because many threads are woven into the design of a building, it is important to understand the history and viewpoint of those concerned with its design in order to fully appreciate the influences on its eventual composition’ (2018: 167). Chanin expertly handles myriad overlapping and imbricated threads in her account of Australia House (1912–18), a monumental Beaux-Arts structure in the middle of London’s Strand. She identifies the dearth of critical analyses relating to the Commonwealth’s first Dominion House in London – currently included in England’s National Heritage List – as well as the limited glimpses into the Edwardian era to which it belongs. In response, *Capital Designs* draws from vast archival collections to explore the formation of the Australia House and its underexamined place in architecture and urbanism in London at the beginning of the twentieth century. Chanin aptly demonstrates to mainstream and academic audiences how a building’s historical significance – and, moreover, the task of writing its history – must address the complexity of its past events and its key protagonists.

Chanin’s investigation begins by discussing the city image of London in the 1900s as being impacted by mass urbanisation and new modes of transport, and the efforts by the London County Council (LCC) to improve it through the Aldwych-Kingsway development. The narrative then traces the representation of England and Australia within international events, such as the Seventh International Congress of Architects (1906) and the Franco-British Exhibition (1908). Such events, alongside international media, travel and trade, brought a heightened awareness of a country’s perceived identity: England as the heart of the Commonwealth and Australia as a newly federated nation. The story then follows the acquisition of a raised trapezoidal ‘island site’ in the Strand for the building of Australia House, its design by Alexander Marshall Mackenzie and Son, its construction by the Dove Brothers, and the integration of sculptural elements by Harold Parker. The book’s final chapters are set against the backdrop of World War I, which delayed the building’s completion until it was officially opened by King George V in 1918.

Much of the book is dedicated to unpacking how the formation of Australia House would satisfy pressing needs at the time and the parties that would stand to benefit. By being located on a wedge of land in the centre of the Strand – which at the time housed government offices for the
State of Victoria – it would stand adjacent to the Aldwych-Kingsway development and support the LCC’s efforts to elevate the city’s image. The building would act as a billboard, projecting ‘the strength and stability’ and ‘the wealth and importance of Australia’ (2018: xiii) as a country with abundant opportunities for immigrants and investors. By signposting England’s commitment to the Dominions, Australia House would pave the way for ‘Dominion Houses’ in London for Canada, South Africa, India and New Zealand. The building also tested the new construction methodologies of steel-framing, while the importation of Australian timber and marble for its interiors points to patterns of globalised trade. Within the timeframe under scrutiny in Capital Designs, Australia House provides a unique window into shifting urban expectations for imperial London as it was impacted by architectural, political and international forces.

A powerful undercurrent to Chanin’s work lies in the story’s micro-narratives and memorable personas involved in the construction of Australia House. Chanin’s colourful descriptions of characters such as Robert Muirhead Collins, King O’Malley, Alfred Deakin and Alexander Marshall Mackenzie make these figures relatable and very human. For example, she writes of the ‘transparently candid, if idealistic and impetuous’ Sir Albert Henry George Grey (2018: 183) and notes the fatigued visage of Australia’s High Commissioner Andrew Fisher towards the end of the building’s completion: ‘the strain of the past year is clear across his face’ (2018: 262). Through these evocative descriptions – the product of meticulous research and engagement with key artefacts – Chanin transports the reader directly into crucial moments in Australia House’s evolution. A vivid instance includes the ceremonial laying of the building’s foundation stone in 1913 by King George V and its vibrant atmosphere of celebration, indicated by the accompanying ‘coo-ee!’ calls from the crowd.

Chanin’s dedication to detail in Capital Designs is arguably one of the book’s greatest strengths; however, some readers may regard this as its only minor fault. One might be temporarily lost in minutiae when encountering a vast succession of events, players and parties. In another respect, the detail about Australia House’s formation and ending the book precisely when the building was completed precludes a more profound appraisal of the finished work. Perhaps there could even be speculation on its enduring urban impacts on the lived experiences of city-goers. Nevertheless, Chanin’s rigour in accurately portraying the building’s history would not allow any margin for conjecture. Capital Designs provides a compelling account of Australia House’s multi-layered history, all told with the confidence of hard evidence in Chanin’s clear, authoritative voice.

— Annalise Varghese
University of Tasmania
annalise.varghese@utas.edu.au