

Photograph of the ‘Paris end’ of Collins Street, circa 1960

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words – but I only have five hundred to discuss this image. But then again, perhaps five hundred might be too many, as I am not sure that I will have enough to say.

The black and white photograph is of a city street – identified as the ‘Paris end’ of Collins Street, Melbourne, circa 1960. It is daytime, in one of the warmer months of the year. A woman carrying parcels, and a couple of women with their arms inter-linked, are walking along the pavement towards the photographer. Two have their eyes lowered as they approach, as though trying not to acknowledge the photographer’s presence. The third woman is wearing sun glasses, making it impossible to determine the direction of her gaze. But she too remains unresponsive. They appear to have adopted an attitude of studied indifference.

All the women are well-dressed – in stylish frocks, wearing gloves, and carrying handbags. Two sport small pillar box hats. They walk purposefully, as though there to conduct errands, rather than engage in more pleasurable activities. A similar sense of purpose is noticeable in the men in suits, who stride along the footpath.

A number of casually dressed men and women sit in small groups beneath open umbrellas, at tables that align the kerb-side of the footpath. In contrast to the pedestrians, they appear to have come to the area for social purposes – to converse, eat, and drink. One smokes. It is they who could be said to most reflect a sense of style and behaviour that could be labelled Parisian.

Alas, the ‘Paris end’ of Collins Street now exists primarily in name alone. According to the National Trust, by 1975 almost half of the older buildings had been destroyed, and many more have been demolished since that time. Gone are most of the elegant Victorian buildings – replaced by bland, multi-storeyed towers. A rare survivor from earlier times is the structure that houses the Melbourne Club. Despite the sometimes negative criticism the Club - as an institution - has evoked over the years, it has at least managed to preserve and care for its headquarters for over one and a half centuries. It is a potent reminder of what has been lost.

Parisians have not allowed such wilful destruction of their city.

Carole Hooper