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# 9

## The Exilic Vision of a Once Fashionable Quarter: Danila Vassilieff in Interwar Fitzroy

*Robert Pascoe and Chris McConville*

Danila Vassilieff fled Soviet Russia, sojourned the globe and worked in the Australian outback, before settling, briefly, (1937–1938) in industrial Fitzroy, Melbourne (fig. 9.1)(Moore, 2013). Living amongst unemployed factory-hands, single mothers, widows and Aboriginal families, he painted their working-class neighbourhood, winning almost no interest. One critic, Basil Burdett, was intrigued though, certain that Vassilieff had uncovered “the profounder spirit of the place [Fitzroy], of its real life, in these studies of children, at play or sitting and in these vivid glimpses of streets and alleys in this once fashionable and now faded quarter” (Burdett 1938, 8).

Vassilieff explores this “spirit of the place”, often by painting on whitened plywood cut from tea-chests, material used as furnishings by the local poor. Consistently, he foregrounds children and women. Painting at street corners, he fills picture planes with scurrying pedestrians, ambling dogs and fragmented advertising text on walls, striking a rare optimistic note in a corner of Melbourne typically presented as monotone and bleak.

In *Fitzroy Street Scene* (fig. 9.2), our eye is drawn to a knot of children playing in the lower foreground. Confident, alert and inquiring, Vassilieff has sharpened their faces through linear reds and yellows on his whitened base. Vassilieff uses the sloping street to direct our gaze from the children towards a distant Collingwood Post Office tower. A red toy car glides across Fitzroy’s Charles St, suggesting an enveloping ‘kinetic’ streetscape. His other street scenes typically play on such connectivities. *Little Sisters*, *Fitzroy Girls* 1937 and *Valerie and Betty* all locate children in the foreground with tapering lines leading us down gritty streets. In this way, his “figures and objects are visually linked for a fluid spatial reading”

# THE EXILIC VISION OF A ONCE FASHIONABLE QUARTER

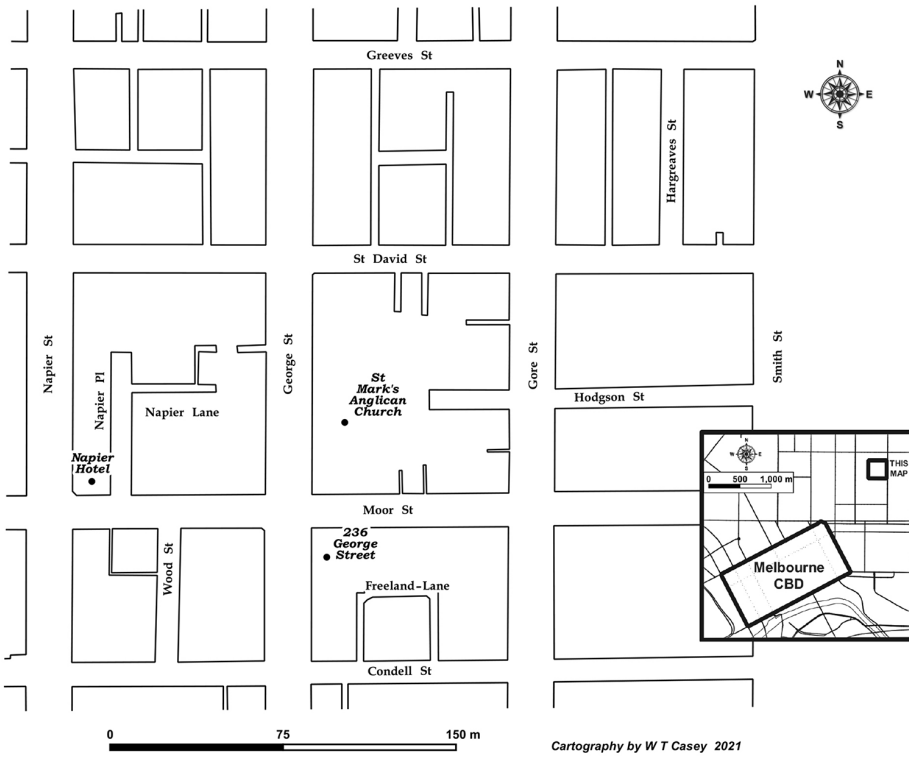


FIGURE 9.1: W.T. Casey, *Map of Fitzroy*, 1930s.



FIGURE 9.2: Danila Vassilieff, *Fitzroy Street Scene*, 1937, On board, 43.2 h × 47.0 w cm (OA 17.1965, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Copyright Heide Museum, Melbourne).

(Moore 2013, 58). Similarly, in *George Street, Fitzroy*, 1938 (fig. 9.3) a boy in a toy car rolls in from the left. Girls chat in a circled group, St Mark's church spire glimpsed between them. *Children Playing, Collingwood* (fig. 9.4) takes the perspective upwards to shops, in Smith St, Fitzroy. A boy rolls a wheel; a girl is stepping energetically away, hinting again at youthful agency beyond the frame.

These paintings prefigure that imageability captured in Kevin Lynch's classic urban elements: landmark/edge/pathway/district/node (Lynch 1960; Götz/Holmén 2018). Vassilieff positions church spires and clock-towers as landmarks. Pathways connect people to place. His is a tightly edged district, the streets around his home. His eye is drawn almost magnetically to the node of Smith's grocery, Gore and Moor Sts.

Bill Hillier's spatial syntax updates Lynch's typology, such that axial lines and isovists can be identified in Vassilieff's streets (Dalton/Bafna 2003, 59.5, 59.9). Repeatedly, axial lines connect hands or shoulders of his subjects to alleyway entrances, or to passers-by centred in picture planes. His isovists avoid pubs, factories or sportsgrounds; the masculine nodes of Fitzroy. Instead, he explores the neighbourhood of woman and children, the corner store where they gathered, their role-playing in the street and the canine companions to their sociability.

Vassilieff sensed, as our 1938 critic suggested, a neglected "spirit of the place". Otherwise marginalized women and children are, through Vassilieff's scenes, in command of their streetspace. Because he is an exile, as so many in Fitzroy after the



FIGURE 9.3: Danila Vassilieff, *George Street Fitzroy*, 1938, 1938, oil, canvas on board, 106.9 h × 84.7 w cm (NGA 76.268, National Gallery of Australia).



FIGURE 9.4: Danila Vassilieff, *Children Playing, Collingwood*, 1937, oil and pencil on canvas, 49.1 h × 60.0 w cm (1979.26, Geelong Art Gallery, purchase assisted by Caltex-Victoria Government Art Fund).

Great Depression were themselves, his perspective resonates as authentic. Vassilieff understood Russian modernism, through his London studies with Vladimir Polunin. No doubt a cultural memory colours his Fitzroy scenes (Bojić 2020). And yet, Vassilieff has little patience for ‘academicians’. Rather, he embraces his neighbours’ vitality, and so, uncannily, anticipates Lynch’s legible city.

Social reformers descended on Fitzroy as the aftershocks of interwar Depression ravaged working-class lives. Intent on modernizing Fitzroy’s urban fabric and thus reforming Vassilieff’s neighbours, they frequently operated from St Mark’s Social Settlement House, two doors from Vassilieff’s boarding house. Tony Birch noted their use of text and photograph to “demonise women in particular” (2004, 8). On the whole, however, children remained their favoured precursors to reform. Their continuously circulated photograph *Entrance to a Slum Pocket* (fig. 9.5) shows two children, whom the camera isolates in the void of an empty laneway. In this hostile locale, devoid of passers-by, dogs, flowers or trees, Billy and Milly are not playing with carts, prams or dolls as children do in Vassilieff’s scenes. Instead the reformer’s camera reduces them to poking a stick at a mud puddle.

Propagandizing child-victims eventually enabled reformers to modernize Vassilieff’s “once fashionable now faded quarter”, through spartan, functionalist apartments. Although Vassilieff sold few of his Fitzroy paintings, his later Expressionist works did win respect, as inspirations for Australia’s modernist art (Vassilieff, 1952). Interestingly, in 21st century Fitzroy, Vassilieff’s “spirit of the place” rather





FIGURE 9.5: Oswald Barnett, *Entrance to a Slum Pocket*, c.1935, Photograph gelatin silver, 6.7 h × 9.7 w cm, Oswald Barnett Collection (H2001.291/12, State Library of Victoria).

than the reformers' modernist legacy has proven "the profounder", in Burdett's phrase. Austere, modernist apartments are reviled, the corner store revived, Vassilieff's vernacular romanticized. The Russian exile might have found in this thoroughly gentrified neighbourhood, a place to feel at home.

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