

# The Tullamarine Airport in the 1970s

## A lost icon of the jet age

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The 1960s signalled the onset of the jet age and cities worldwide rushed to accommodate this new modernity. The jet age spawned the construction of the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne: Australia's first purpose-built jetport. Although now considered purely functional in the 21st century, in 1970, Tullamarine was the height of modernity and progress. Its design was truly minimalist. Built in prefabricated concrete, its brutalist buildings sat like sentinels in the sparse surrounds of Macedon basalt plains. It had Victoria's first complete freeway while Tullamarine was Australia's first airport connected by freeway to its city. It was the envy of all Australia.

Melbournians had long waited for Tullamarine's opening with visitor numbers exceeding travellers even until the mid-1980s. People visited its cinemas, restaurants, bars and other facilities as day trips or on as an attraction on its own accord and the use of such facilities in such a comprehensive fashion to generate revenue from the travelling and non-travelling public made Tullamarine truly distinctive amongst airports of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The airport was an icon of 1970s Australia through its vibe, its facilities, the architecture and interior design. Much of this is now lost in the 21st century. This paper explores the lost iconography of the Tullamarine Airport through four areas of analysis. It first looks at Tullamarine as a monument to the 'jet age' in Australia. The paper describes Tullamarine's initial sublimity from multiple perspectives – the public, the media and academia. The iconic facilities that made Tullamarine a visitor attraction are also noted, particularly the Astrojet Centre, its cinema, the Top Air restaurant and the observation decks. Finally its cutting-edge interior design and minimalist architecture are also described.

**Keywords:** Melbourne; Airport; Tullamarine; Icon; Astrojet

## Introduction

According to the ACCC [Australian Competition and Consumer Commission], Melbourne Airport is gaining rapidly on Sydney in the key indices of outrageousness and gouging, and now is actually the most expensive airport in Australia if you want to park for three hours.

Why do we put up with it?

My theory is that the entire experience of air travel is a conspiracy of petty humiliations, designed subtly to erode the self-esteem of its human clients ...

In this article by journalist Annabel Crabb (2010), one of the main complaints against Melbourne Airport, otherwise known as Tullamarine, is enunciated. Crabb's derision over costly parking, traffic jams and poor functionality and service is now commonplace. In its Airport Monitoring Report 2013-14 (2015:x), the ACCC revealed that both Melbourne and Perth Airports had 'the equal lowest overall average rating of any monitored airport' for quality of service. This was not what Tullamarine's designers had originally intended.

This 21st century revelation is in stark contrast to the lost icon that was Tullamarine in the 1970s. Tullamarine's construction was a result of Essendon Airport being unable to expand to cater for the Boeing 707 in the 1950s. In response, the Commonwealth set up the Melbourne Airport Panel (MAP) in 1958 to decide the site of a purpose-built jetport with the main contenders being Essendon, Tullamarine and Laverton. Built from 1963 to 1970, its principal planner, Dr Bill Bradfield of the Department of Civil Aviation, allowed for many facilities such as the Astrojet with its exhibition centre and cinema, first class restaurants and bars which were open late, seven days a week, and were all designed to raise revenue to make Tullamarine self-sufficient. This concept is now described in the 21st century as the Airport City (see Kasarda and Appold 2010). Its brutalist architecture, designed by architects from the Department of Works, and bright interiors were also at the height of cutting-edge 1970s design.

This iconography has been lost in the modern day, a result of airport constantly expanding and changing. This paper describes in four sections what made Tullamarine an icon of the 1970s. It also describes the public's and the media's admiration for the airport through the lens of the glamour of air travel in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly of jet aircraft, which was also used as a lure for not only travellers, but people who would visit the airport as a destination in its own right as well. The facilities that made the airport an attraction are assessed, as these were principal to the airport's popularity. Lastly, the modernistic design features of the built environment will also be discussed. Key sources used include archival material from the Civil Aviation Historical Society, popular press & professional journals as well as sources related to its current reassessment eg "Jet Set Melbourne" exhibition and online blogs.

## Tullamarine and the Jet Age

The late 1960s and 1970s was a tumultuous time for aviation and technology throughout the world. Man had landed on the moon in 1969; the design of the Concorde and the Boeing SST (Supersonic transport) were well underway, and the Boeing 747, an aircraft that would revolutionise air travel,

had its first commercial flight in January 1970. Jet aircraft were an icon of 1960s modernity and were principal to the concept of modern air travel that fundamentally changed the way people travelled around the world (Vantoch 2013:91). By carrying twice as many passengers at twice the speed of their piston predecessors, jets instigated the 'era of mass air travel' by increasing accessibility and facilitating a decrease in fares (Davidson and Spearritt 2000:283). The B707 was pivotal in paving 'the way for the world to travel [in this] new way' (Sutter 2006:64). Such commercial aircraft were making the world a smaller place: 'modern travel was going to bring everyone closer together – and jets were the vehicle of choice' (Heimann and Silver 2010:257).

The arrival of the first commercial jet airliner, the de Havilland Comet 1 in 1952 heralded the 'jet age': an era that was characterised by speed, modernity and glamour (Lubin 2003:136-137; Vantoch 2013:91). The jet age created the jet set – a group of aspirational, mobile, sophisticated international travellers who pursued the glamour of jet travel (Gregg 2014). Jets and their propeller driven predecessors also helped bring migrants to Australia during a time of significant population growth in the 1960s (Limnios-Sekeris 2015) while aircraft were important in fostering 'a sense of interconnectedness' between nations during the post-war era (Robertson 2014).

The introduction of jets had an immediate effect on the way tourism was conducted. An absence of a jet airport was considered by the American tourism industry as a 'disadvantage' as tourists preferred jets to other air travel modes:

The question of prestige is one which cannot be regarded lightly. From the tourist point of view a city without a jet airport must be regarded as being not readily accessible ... A city is rated much higher by the international air traveller if it is served by pure jet aircraft (Tullamarine Jet Airport Committee 1962:18-19).

Although the jet set pursued the jet age in the 1960s, flying was still a fundamentally expensive means of travel during this time. A flight from Sydney to London in 1965 represented five months of average earnings, which was around \$1140 (Australian Government 2008:39). This inaccessibility further fed the glamour and attraction of jet travel. Nonetheless, the ascendancy of jets was unstoppable, which led to Tullamarine being constructed as Australia's first jetport. To meet the public's intense interest in aviation, Bradfield designed Tullamarine with a multitude of facilities that would not only service the travelling public but visitors as well. This policy was hugely successful as by the late 1970s, the airport was still captivating some 250,000 sightseers weekly as well as accommodating 120,000 actual travellers (Department of Transport c.1978).

### **Tullamarine – the people's choice**

The Herald declared Melbourne had joined the "international [jet] set" with Tullamarine's opening (Herald 1/7/1970). The public was allowed a preview of the terminal building during the weekend of 27-28 June 1970, one week before the official opening and Melbournians flocked to the debut of Australia's new edifice to modernism and the jet age (SMH 29/6/1970). Over 80,000 people visited the new jetport with traffic so congested along the Tullamarine Freeway that many cars were turned back with pleas for visitors to "stay at home" on local radio (SMH 29/6/1970). Tullamarine's opening weekend was "the biggest public attraction since Victoria's Art Centre" opened in August 1968 (DCA News 1970).

The public and the media deemed the new airport a “wild success” (Architect 1970b). Jack Percival, aviation writer to the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), described Tullamarine as “the airport with the lot” and “a glamour international airport” (Percival 1969). Melbourne’s Age described Tullamarine as a “magnificent air-terminal complex” that promised “so much for the international traveller” (Age 30/6/1970a). The West Australian newspaper reported in 1967 that Tullamarine was an “Aviation Showpiece”: “Melbourne looks like becoming Australia’s No 1 city for international flying” (Johnstone 1967). The Herald reported Ed Clark, the former American ambassador to Australia, declared of Tullamarine: “Man, that airport’s really something” (Herald 1/7/1970).

Melbourne’s new jetport was awe-inspiring. It was one of the biggest single building projects “yet undertaken in Australia” according to Minister for Works, Sir Reginald Wright (Wright 1970). Tullamarine was also described as “the largest and most important airport terminal to be constructed in Australia” (Osborne and Jack c.1964). The sheer magnitude of the structure and the materials used was sublime. Almost three miles (4.8 kilometres) of carpet was laid in the terminal, while over 800,000 square feet of plasterboard and 40,500 square feet of ceiling tiles were used (Age 30/6/1970b; Age 30/6/1970c). The completed terminal building was massive:

The floor space for all the terminals is 821,000 square feet which is about eight times as much as is found in a large, 16-storey office block in the city (Age 30/6/1970a).

Reflecting on its iconic nature and its importance as an international staging place, Australian Country and Western singer, Kevin Shegog, was inspired to write a song, which was released in 1971: Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine:

- Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine,
- Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine,
- Flying up there looking down on the international scene,
- At Melbourne Airport, Tullamarine.

### **Tullamarine – iconic facilities**

The facilities built at Tullamarine to serve not only the traveller, but to be an attraction to visitors in its own right was unsurpassed during the 1960s/1970s. No other airport in the world, apart from Orly Paris, came close to the range of facilities at Tullamarine. There was also another purpose of the diverse range of amenities at Tullamarine. These were all on airport land and thus became a source of non-aviation revenue, which would allow Tullamarine to become self-sufficient from a business perspective. Most important to this plan was the Astrojet Centre, its cinema, the observation decks and the Top Air restaurant.

The Astrojet Space Centre was central to the concept of Tullamarine being a place to visit. A 30-year lease was given to Astrojet Exhibitions Pty Ltd to run the centre with facilities including an exposition hall, art gallery, cinema, food outlets, a chemist, offices, a post office with a florist/giftshop and a bottle shop (Gilchrist 1970; Concept 1970). The Astrojet Centre was a large complex with an area of over 50,000 square feet (Concept 1970). A cinema, named the Astrojet Cinema, was operational between 1970 and 1978. From 1971 it showed contemporary feature films such as Beneath the

Planet of the Apes, 2001 Space Odyssey and Airport. The cinema was open Wednesdays-Sunday nights, showing double features at 7.45pm with matinees Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

The exposition hall of the Astrojet was the main part of the space centre's attraction. It was a unique educational amenity – built as part of an airport facility, and unlike any other resource constructed as part of any airport during the 1960s and 1970s. Described as a window to the "Space Age", it was designed to "increase the awareness of the general public, especially youth, to the potential of international air travel and the achievements and aspirations of the international space programme" (Space Vision 1970:3). The main attraction was an electronic model of Tullamarine and the City of Melbourne, which was the biggest of its type in the world (Gilchrist 1970).

The aim of the airport model was to give the visitor an accurate impression of airport operations:

The controller 'flies' around the hall some twenty planes representing many international and domestic airlines and brings them into landing patterns along Perspex 'flight paths' simulating actual airport procedures (Space Vision 1970:7).

A number of airline companies had exhibits around this installation including BOAC, QANTAS, United Airlines and Alitalia amongst others. The mezzanine level had major exhibitions from NASA, the French Space programme and the Commonwealth Department of Supply. The NASA exhibit was displayed outside the US for the first time. An art gallery contained works from various sources: Australian Bark Paintings, Italian art works presented by Alitalia Italian Airlines and a special NASA space painting exhibition 'Eye Witness to Space', which was on loan from the Smithsonian Institute (Herald 14/8/1970). A hair dressing salon, a dentist, a chemist and a GP clinic were also available. The courtyard garden was called the Planet Garden and was "designed to fit the space age theme of the centre" (DCA c.1970).

A bottle shop, which was known as the Liquor Locker, was situated on the outer northwest corner of the Astrojet Centre. Wine tastings showcasing Australian wines were regularly conducted in the cellar of the bottle shop, which was open to the ground level in the form of an atrium (Space Vision 1970) (Figure 1). The bottle shop was part of the overall plan of the Astrojet, as patrons of the airport would also visit the bottle shop as part of their airport experience. It was always the intention of the DCA to have a range of shopping facilities accessible to the public and travellers: "The shopping mall will include all the facilities normally found in a regular shopping centre" (DCA 1970). A supermarket was also planned for the Space Centre but this was not built (Space Vision 1970:4,38).

The combination of the observation platforms and the Astrojet Centre provided a whole day's entertainment. "Bruce", a blogger whose father used to take him to visit Tullamarine, describes this experience:

My dad used to take my brother and me to the airport for a day out. We would spend an hour or so watching the planes take off and land, from a balcony upstairs where you could watch with the aid of large binocular stands. We would then head back inside for a bite to eat, then across the road to the Astrojet Cinema. Then we would head back to the terminal to watch a few more planes then go home. A great day's entertainment (Perkin 2010).

The jet age was made an exciting visitor experience by the Astrojet. Matt Morgan, who also visited Tullamarine when young, described the experience of visiting the centre:

I can remember going with Dad in the ZG Fairlane to the Liquor Locker to stock up for many an upcoming Lions Club do, and I remember going to see Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid with the whole family at the Astrojet. The one thing I clearly and happily recall is getting out of the car at Tulla and smelling the jet fuel; to a wee lad that was mighty exciting (Morgan 2013).

The Astrojet Centre is now a lost icon of modernity and the technological sublime. Its exhibition space was flooded by a hailstorm in 1974 and the cinema closed in 1978. Local Melbourne artist Zoë Meagher has recently used the derelict Astrojet building as a backdrop to her performance named *Astrojet* (2014), which was “part bus tour, part audio guide ... to the secret location of Melbourne’s forgotten Astrojet Space and Science Centre” (Meagher 2014). Meagher’s “original inspiration came from a copy of the *Space Vision* (1970) book at [her] parents’ house, and discovering that the Astrojet building still existed but had been largely forgotten”. Reflecting on the impact of the Astrojet performance, Art Critic Joanna Gould stated:

As soon as the audio began I committed to the fantasy of being a patron in 1970. I imagined visiting the centre for the first time, eager and hopeful. When our personal headsets encouraged us to daydream about a technology-filled future of wonder, I did. When it explained the many sights of the Astrojet Space Centre, I got excited. I imagined exploring the Lenton Parr sculpture ‘Astra’ on sight and eating at its restaurant. I allowed the 70s disco backing music to wash over me as I saw the Melbourne city in a new light – a futuristic urban environment, idyllic and bright. I was seduced (Gould 2014).

As part of the attraction, food and beverages were served at many retail outlets throughout the airport. The catering at Tullamarine was provided by the concession Aerojet Caterers Pty Ltd, whose holdings included the Top Air International Restaurant, VIP rooms, the second floor cocktail bar and lounge, two quick service restaurants, two cocktail bars in the domestic terminals and milk bars on the observation decks. Observation decks were an integral part of the jet age experience with many overseas airports, including Orly and O’Hare, having many visitors. Like Tullamarine, Orly was designed for the visitor with grand viewing platforms on multiple levels. In 1965, it was France’s most attended monument with four million visitors (Repiquet 2005:194). Orly also had a cinema, the “Publicis Cinema”.

The Top Air was the flagship of Tullamarine’s dining facilities and was a major attraction. Located on the second floor of the international terminal adjacent to the cocktail bar, the Top Air had seating for up to 320 guests and a small dance floor (Bang and Gorrie 1970). The inaugural executive chef was Emile Jung from Luxemburg. On arriving, Jung stated that “the new airport will serve the best food in Australia or I go home [sic] to Luxemburg” (Ryan 1970). This was a profound prognostication as by 1971 Jung went to France to take over the Au Crocodile restaurant in Strasbourg. Jung’s main concern and probably the reason he returned to France, was the lack of appropriately trained staff in Australia (Ryan 1970).

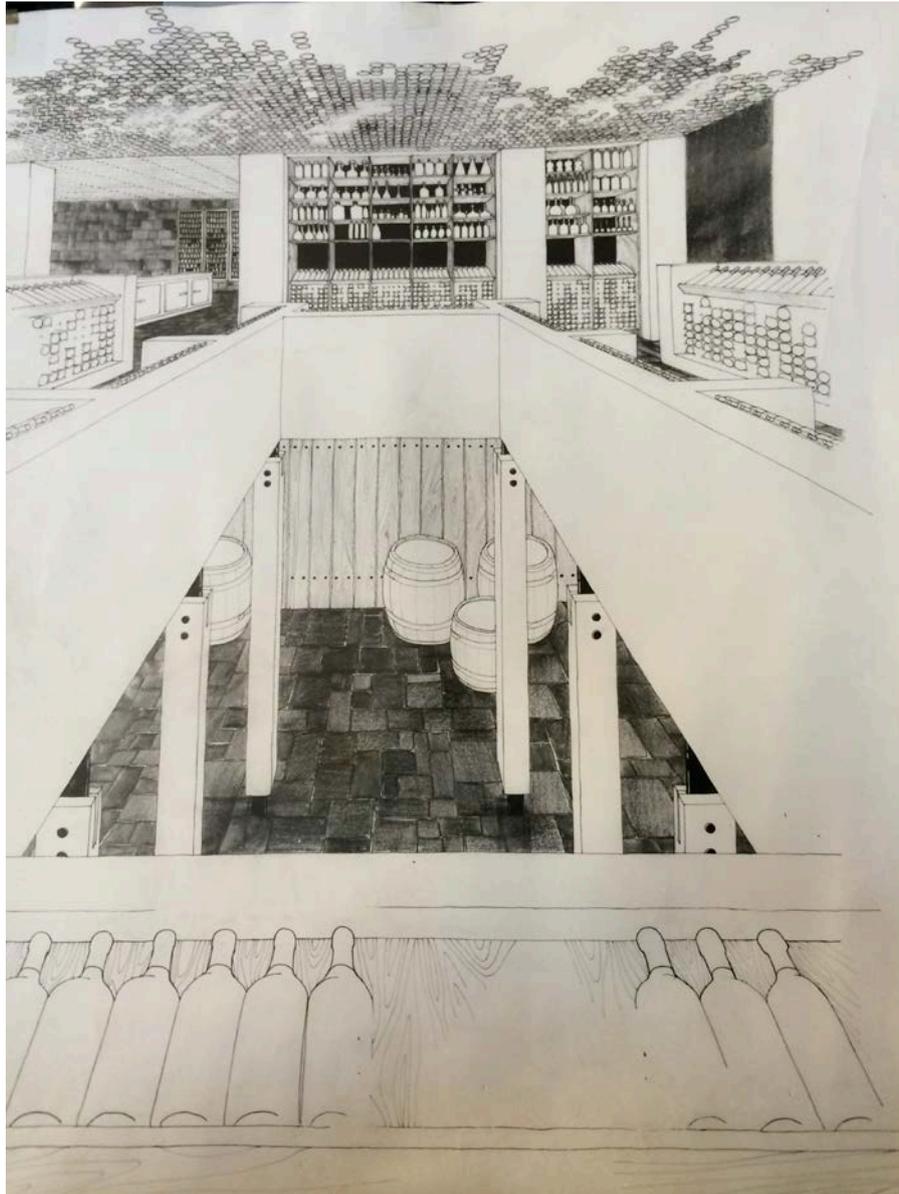


Figure 1 – Architectural drawings of the Liquor Locker showing the cellar atrium c.1968. Source RMIT Design Archives.

Jung was a culinary rising star. Au Crocodile was in decline when he bought it in 1971. Jung received one Michelin star a year later in 1972, two in 1975 and Michelin's highest honour: three stars in 1989. Therefore Jung's presence at Tullamarine was a sign of the intentions of the Top Air and its owners. As with the Astrojet Space Centre and cinema, the Top Air was designed as a destination for a unique dining experience, thus reinforcing Tullamarine as a place to visit. Consistent with the choice of chef, the Top Air was a fine dining restaurant when it opened: a "prestige" dining experience (Space Centre 1970:38). The crockery was made by Allied English Potters, which also manufactured Royal Doulton and Crown Derby China (Age 30/6/1970d). Tullamarine was an unusual site for this style of fine dining in 1960s Melbourne, which was generally restricted to larger hotels and high-class inner-CBD restaurants. The Top Air utilised the spectacle of the airport and its planes

as a dramatic stage: the jet setter's podium upon which many a memorable dinner could be had and was publicised as such.

### **Tullamarine – an iconic built environment**

Tullamarine's buildings, which were distant from the city, were like sentinels rising out of the sparse Macedon plains. This "pleasantly rural" setting complimented and highlighted its built environment (MacDonald 1970). Architectural critic Robyn Boyd, who initially disapproved of the lack of striking architecture and avant garde design, reflected on the minimalist appearance of the setting: "Tullamarine was built on one of the most beautiful sites of any metropolitan airport anywhere. A very fine \$30 million freeway carries you only 13 miles from Melbourne to a great flat valley surrounded by low hills" (Boyd 1971).

Architect David Watson assessed the architecture of Tullamarine for the *Architect Journal*. Watson, like Boyd, lamented the lack of style co-ordination between some of the buildings however, he did acknowledge the simplicity of form that the architecture created, which was both reasoned and functional:

The symbol of place is clearly defined by the plan form: dictated by the logic of road curve on one side of the building, and aircraft marshalling on the other ... By and large, the building is a simple workable answer to complex technical and functional problems (Watson 1970).

The terminal, water tower, control tower and services building were examples of modernist, brutalist architecture with tinted glazing, *béton brute* concrete and precast concrete elements predominating. We have seen in this paper the iconic nature of the terminal's size and sublimity, and this was complimented and contributed to by its architectural qualities. Many components of Tullamarine's design were dressed in raw concrete including the water tower, large portions of the control tower and the elevated roadway and bridges. The appearance of the curvilinear roadway against the concave terminal resembled the International Style departure hall of La Guardia, New York (1964) and this defined for Tullamarine, according to the National Trust:

The 'modern' concept of convenient intermodal travel ... with the potential for the public to travel directly from the city to the elevated departure terminal entrance and then directly onto the planes via aerobridges, without ever stepping outside (National Trust 2010) (Figure 2).

Much to the lament of Boyd and Watson, many of the ancillary buildings were also of a striking modern design, which highlighted the lack of co-ordination with the terminal structures. The \$2 million Astrojet Centre was a modernist, glazed white brick structure designed by architect Kurt Popper, a Jewish immigrant from Vienna who arrived in Australia in 1939, which was centred on a garden plaza (Popper n.d:5; Edquist 2000:11). The southern face of this building was adorned by the *Astra* (1970), which was a welded steel sculpture by artist and Director of the Victorian College of the Arts, Lenton Parr. The *Astra* was Australia's "biggest welded steel structure" and was intended to symbolise flight and travel (Age 1/4/1970) (Figure 3).



Figure 2 – The elevated road and terminal buildings. Tullamarine 1970. Source Civil Aviation Historical Society (CAHS)

Another ancillary building was the Travelodge Hotel. This \$3 million motel was the first Travelodge to be designed in Australia with three concave curves forming a ‘tri-arc’, a design based on an American standard Travelodge plan (Architect 1970a). It was considered ‘the new jet age look in accommodation’ (Age 30/6/1970e) with the internal décor, the height of late 1960s interior design. The original colour schemes varied between floors and consisted of lime, aqua and burnt orange tones. Suites had a ‘Spanish theme’ with a built in bar with wall-to-wall shag-pile carpet (Concept 1970).

The terminal’s internal fit-out was equally striking and chic for 1970s Australia. The Australian Women’s Weekly described Tullamarine as “Colormarine”: a “bright joy amid the grass fields” and as “handsome, immensely colourful and efficient”, highlighting the vast array of colours and contemporary design used in the facility (Bang and Gorrie 1970). The terminal and the fingers were minimalist in their fit out. In stark comparison were the bars, cocktail lounges and restaurants. The Top Air restaurant was decorated in bright crimson and purple, with full-length windows allowing views of the aircraft.



Figure 3 – The ‘Astra’ on the south face of the Astrojet Centre adjacent to the entrance for the cinema c.1975. Source CAHS

One of the main designers used by concessions was George Kral. Kral was a post-war immigrant from Czechoslovakia who was a constant of Melbourne’s interior design scene during the 1950s (Edqvist 2013). A highlight of his work was the cocktail lounge and VIP rooms:

The VIP lounge at Tullamarine ... was dark and luxurious with carved timber screens, purple sand-blasted timber lining boards, and an extraordinary sculptural ceiling composed of copper-lined inverted cones, with square apertures providing for concealed lighting and supply and return air conditioning (Edqvist 2013) (Figure 4).

The end product of the VIP lounge, however, was not Kral’s complete vision for the space. Potted trees were to be placed with their foliage in between the cones “producing a grotto-like effect” but this concept never came to fruition, probably as a result of high cost (Edqvist 2013). A facility completely fitted out to Kral’s design was the Liquor Locker. The interior’s earthiness reflected the materials used: sandblasted concrete pillars and slate floors (Edqvist 2013). The predominant feature was a “unique” floating ceiling made from over 14,000 amber bottles (Concept 1970).



Figure 4 – View of the cocktail lounge with Kral’s inverted cone roof. Source CAHS

## Conclusion

Today, we don’t associate Tullamarine as an icon of 1970s Australia unlike the Sydney Opera House, Mad Max, Paul Hogan or Holden cars. To those in the 21st century, Tullamarine is just an airport, but in the 1970s it was much more, relying on the novelty of air travel for commercial gain. It also aided the cultural and ethnic development of the State of Victoria, growth of which was previously enhanced by events such as the 1956 Olympics and post-war migration. The opening of Tullamarine, however, was a turning point. Kevin Shegog and many other commentators considered that with Tullamarine, Melbourne had entered the “international scene”.

The Tullamarine Airport represented the height of modernity when it opened on 1 July 1970. It was an icon of the jet age – with its many facilities, its brutalist architecture and dazzling interiors. Tullamarine was a place to visit. Many of the facilities, which were popular with the public and the media, are now lost in a time when air travel is purely functional without any of the glamour or sublimity seen in 1970. With bloggers and artists lamenting this bygone experience, Tullamarine is now a lost icon of a time when aviation became more accessible and the joy and awe of flying was at its peak.

Airports are dynamic facilities and Tullamarine is no different. A new phase of expansion and growth is currently taking place. A recently developed budget terminal and multistorey carpark – terminal four, has been constructed as an extension of terminal three and the planning of a new third

runway, first described in 1958, is now underway. The Travelodge, now a Holiday Inn, is ever present with its 'tri-arc' curves still prominent as is the Astrojet, but this is now an abandoned building awaiting a new lease on life. It was the forethought of Bradfield's blueprint that allowed so much land to be available for lessees not only in 1970 but in the current day. Tullamarine is waiting to become an icon again.

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