

BYZANTINE RISING

Linda Carr looks at the intriguing architecture
of some North Geelong churches.

Photography by Jeffrey Richardson





For many Victorians, the mention of heritage architecture evokes images of blue-stone homesteads and sprawling mansions built in the 1800s by wealthy industrialists and pastoralists.

However here in Geelong we have examples of heritage architecture that link back many, many centuries into European history.

Built in the mid-20th century for postwar European migrants, the architecture of Orthodox churches in North Geelong can be traced back to the Byzantine era that begun in 4th century AD. These buildings are perfect reminders that a nation's heritage does not stand-still – frozen in cobwebs – but evolves over time reflecting the tides of history.

Wander the streets of north Geelong and the first external feature of Byzantine architecture that immediately strikes you is the elevated domes on church roofs – symbolising Heaven. The domes themselves rest on modest structures called cupola which form the interface between the roof and dome, allowing light and natural



ventilation for the congregation. It's a twist of fate that the uplift of hot air is very good for hot Australian summers. The structures are often built in the shape of a Greek cross – one whose four arms are all the same length. Even the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, completed in 537, is based on the Greek cruciform. The crosses on the domes are in various shapes, for example the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox cross typically has six arms as opposed to four.

Compared to Catholic and Protestant architecture, the windows seen in the North Geelong architecture are unassuming. Byzantine churches rarely had stained glass – the focus was more on mosaics and murals. As you step into the cool, church tranquillity, the domes' impact on the internal atmosphere is evident – your attention is immediately drawn to the wall of iconography, dazzling in the light that

filters, often above eye-level, through high windows under the dome. You can appreciate how light coming through stained glass would actually detract from the stunning, gold icons.

The subject in the icon is traditionally portrayed full frontal, with either the full figure shown or the head and shoulders only, staring directly at the viewer. They were designed to facilitate communication with the divine, not produced for art's sake, being rich depictions of the lives of the saints, Bible stories and significant events in the Orthodox tradition. There is nothing to impede your view of them – no alter, no pulpit, no pews – simply a sense of space and solemnity. The absence of pews for the congregation stems from the earliest Byzantine thinking that to sit during a sermon was very improper.

The alter is always on the eastern side



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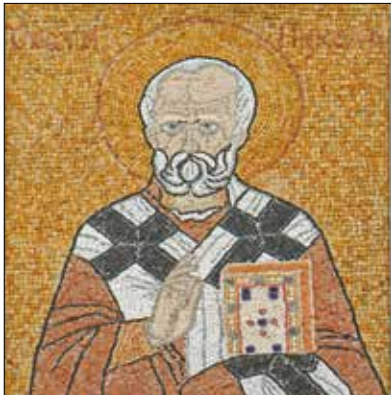
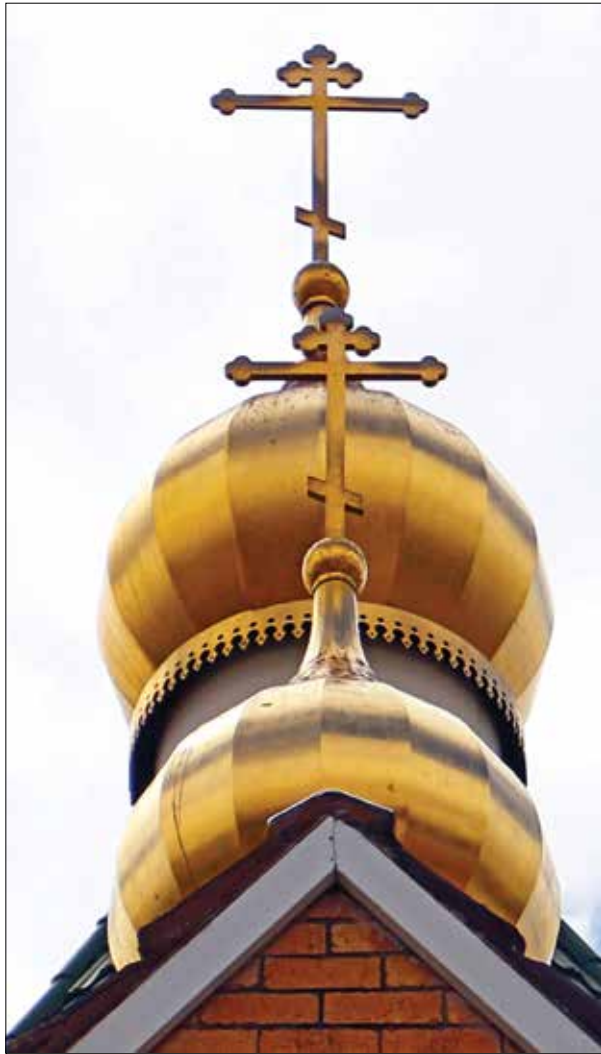
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of the building behind the wall of icons, never in the Centre of the church beneath the dome and is approached by a door on special occasions. In the very old tradition, women are still not permitted in this area.

Father Vukša, from the Serbian congregation, explains a little more of the details.

"Across the top are images of the archangels with Mary and Jesus, the others are our special saints, but also saints from the Bible. Our icons were painted by Dušan Simic from Serbia, he has had numerous exhibitions at prestigious museums and institutions, both in Serbia and internationally. Many of the smaller others around the walls have been donated by members of the congregation."

Of course the reason we are fortunate to have examples of this ancient architecture in our city is due to the move of many migrants from Europe to Australia, driven by conflict and the human desire to live a peaceful life.

In fact it is thought that the north Geelong area has the highest density of

Orthodox architecture in Victoria. Two major employers at the time, Ford Motor Company and International Harvester, employed large numbers of the migrant men and Bell Park and North Geelong grew rapidly. The women often worked as seasonal workers on farms – such as picking peas.

Naturally, language and daily habits created a need for places of community, congregation and support and the area became known as 'Little Europe'. The people often built their own homes themselves, living in caravans on their house plots along unsealed roads.

These Byzantine structures standing in the suburbs of Geelong, speak to us of the meeting of two cultures, the wealth that comes from two sources of enrichment and a significant contribution to our own cultural landscape.

For those interested in this period of history, the Australasian Association for Byzantine Studies may be of interest. It is a not-for-profit organisation that fosters links between scholars, students and laypersons within Australia and New Zealand.

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