ACCEPTED VERSION

Rachel A. Ankeny, Karen Agutter
**Food, taste, and memory in Australian migrant hostels**
Space, Taste and Affect: Atmospheres that Shape the Way We Eat, 2021 / Falconer, E. (ed./s), Ch.4, pp.61-73

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Space, Taste and Affect: Atmospheres that Shape the Way We Eat,* on 1 September 2020, available online: http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315307473-4

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**22 March 2022**

http://hdl.handle.net/2440/131118

# Food, Taste, and Memory in Australian Migrant Hostels

For *Space, Taste and Affect,* edited by Emily Falconer (Routledge)

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> In the multiple sensory properties of food—sight, smell, texture, and taste—lay multiple ways of conveying meanings and memories. (Counihan 2004: 25)

## Introduction

Food has increasingly become a focus of reflection and scholarship, yet much less attention has been paid to how ‘negative’ tastes are formed, and in particular how adverse food reactions can come to be associated with memory and place and have deeper connotations and meanings. In our Hostel Stories project, which explores the Government-run hostels that served as temporary accommodation for large numbers of migrants who came to Australia between the late 1940s and the late 1980s, we have been struck by the vivid memories that many migrants have of the food served upon arrival in Australia, especially their descriptions of particular tastes as unappetising, unpalatable, or even revolting, which frequently dominate their accounts of their experiences.

The Australian Research Council-funded Linkage project “Hostel Stories: Toward a Richer Narrative of the Lived Experiences of Migrants” was carried out at the University of Adelaide in conjunction with community and government partners. Hostel Stories has received over 600 registrations of interest and conducted over 90 oral history interviews with former migrants who went through the post-World War II South Australian hostels (University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee approval H-2012-120), as well as sourcing voluminous archival material on the hostel system across Australia. These migrants included not only those from the United Kingdom (the traditional and preferred source for migrants to Australia) but also so-called Displaced Persons (DPs) from post-World

War II Europe followed by increasing numbers of migrants from throughout Europe and many other locales, as Australia sought to increase its population and foster economic prosperity. Waves of refugees arrived in later years as the result of unrest in a variety of locations including eastern Europe, South America, and southeast Asia, often generating extremely diverse populations within the migrant hostels. Despite differences in background and experiences among these migrants, and in what was provided in various hostels over what is admittedly a relatively long period, the clear point of commonality among these migrants was the food: although plentiful and nutritious, the food is typically described by most as 'horrible'. This chapter uses oral histories, contemporary popular press coverage, archival materials, and scholarly work to explore migrants' reactions relating to food during their time residing in the hostels, showing how critical tastes were to the construction of these locales and migrants' memories of them as well as to their settlement in Australia.

This chapter further highlights how the affective qualities of food and taste became a way to express discontent and assert identity within the transitional space of the hostel, cutting across cultures and nationalities to provide a bargaining chip. Even in later years when hostel management became more conscious of needing to serve culturally-appropriate food in part by employing so-called 'New Australians'[1] in hostel kitchens, food, and especially its lack of palatability, was still a source of constant complaint and conflict between migrants and hostel management, and between migrant groups. Our research documents how the smell, texture and taste of foods such as mutton and pumpkin still affect migrants today, leading to continued refusal to eat these foods, and trigger (typically negative) memories of hostel life. Hostel food clearly contrasted with what had been eaten in places and spaces left behind for those who had migrated, and the new, unfamiliar, and oftentimes uncomfortable space of the hostel negatively affected perceptions of the food and tastes served within it.

## Life in the Hostels

The arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants in the post-World War II period, in particular those of non-British origin, marked a significant shift in Australian immigration policy, and key to the acceptance of these new arrivals by the general population was the promise of their rapid assimilation. Australians were assured by the then Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, that everything possible would be done to assimilate them into the so-called 'Australian way of life'.[2] Key to this assimilation process was education in the English language and in important aspects of Australian culture, including Australian foodways, provided in the hostels (notably sometimes called 'training centres').[3] All hostels had some common characteristics: communal living with shared bathrooms, toilets, and laundries as well as central kitchens and large dining rooms where meals were served, and board included in the rent (which was charged after the first week of residence), with no option for opting out of eating within the hostel. Officially, private cooking for one's family was not allowed and therefore there were no provisions for it.[4] To participate in communal mealtimes, and consume what was offered, appeared to be a mandatory part of this assimilation 'training'.

Previous scholarly literature has analysed various aspects of this history: Catherine Panich (1988) describes the difficulties faced by DPs in the hostels associated with food, as do Glenda Sluga (1988) writing about the Bonegilla hostel in Victoria and Nonja Peters (2001) about hostel life in Western Australia. Andrew Hassam (2009) explores the food experiences of and formalised protests by British migrants as portrayed in popular media; elsewhere we (Agutter & Ankeny 2017) have documented the disempowerment of DP women and families via food habits within the hostels using archival documentation and oral histories; and Nadia Postiglione (2010) examines migrant food experiences in the 1950s, comparing British and Italian accounts particularly what she terms ‘food dispossession’ (cf. Pennay 2010). However these accounts do not tend to stress the affective memories created via the sensual elements of taste, smell, texture and  their underlying meanings. As Hasia Diner (2001) notes in her account of the experiences of migrants who came to America, the flavour and taste of coffee and donuts welcoming immigrants at Ellis Island were pivotal in creating a ‘sweet’ and ‘filling’ impression of the host country (Diner 2001: 16–17). In contrast, those who came through the hostels in Australia had much more negative impressions that to this day have created strongly affective reactions and deeply important meanings among many former migrants.

## Taste Memories

Certain foods and tastes were shown to trigger particular shared memories for Australian migrants (Langfield and Maclean 2002): pumpkin, the Australian term for the broad category of winter squashes used as starchy vegetables, is frequently mentioned as particularly problematic by those who migrated from a variety of locales and spent time in one or more of the hostels. As pumpkin was easily available and relatively inexpensive, it often was served within the hostels as a filling and nutritious vegetable option. But many hostel residents found it not only foreign but distasteful. As described by a Dutch migrant who came to Australia as a ten year-old child: “I will not eat pumpkin…even today I don’t eat pumpkin of any description. There we got pumpkin for breakfast, pumpkin for lunch, pumpkin for tea and I now hate pumpkin…I have vivid memories of it, oh God not this again…Bloody pumpkins…it will go to my grave with me [laughing]” (JV, 17/05/2013). His memories of his hostel experiences are vividly connected with having to eat pumpkin frequently (whether or not it actually was served at every meal, which seems unlikely given the archival evidence). Once he left the hostel, he never wanted to return again, enacting these desires not only literally but also symbolically by avoiding the food that he was forced to tolerate in that context.

A couple who migrated from England to gain better work opportunities generally thought the hostel food was acceptable but nonetheless also noted issues with pumpkin: "of course they gave us pumpkin; well, we'd never had pumpkin in our lives before and so that was a bit of a learning curve having this orange stuff, very sloppily, very sloppy mixture thrown on our things" (R&GS, 18/07/2014). In this description, it is notable that it is not only the lack of familiarity of the food that is off-putting; as the wording underscores, the way in which the pumpkin came to symbolize lack of care, a sort of 'sloppiness' often associated with institutional food and perhaps more generally with the hostel and life in it, is critical. Such attitudes also were noticed by European migrants, for instance when they went on a food strike at the Mayfield West (New South Wales) migrant hostel. According to media reports, "They said the food was not fit to eat…. The men complained…that the food was not fit for human consumption and was thrown on their plates…. the men realised that, coming from different countries, their tastes were different, but Australians would not eat what was served up to them" (*Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* 1952). Thus in these examples we see that food, and how it is presented, can serve as a signal of more general attitudes: good cooking can be welcoming, and providing good food can communicate respect, affection and comfort, poor or 'sloppy' cooking have powerful opposite effect. The lack of care symbolised in the overcooked watery pumpkin, and the unappealing slop that was 'thrown' onto plates, induced powerful affective memories in the migrants who became adverse to eating pumpkin. In addition, these migrants note that pumpkin was 'of course' served, pointing to the fact that it is well-recognised as a frequent source of complaint among former hostel residents, and also intimating that they were not picky or demanding but that these affective responses were commonly shared by others.

The serving of pumpkin was insulting to some migrants who noted that in Europe it was used to feed cattle, not humans (Morris 2001: 72). Some former hostel residents, such as the chef Stefano Manfredi who arrived with his family in 1961 and lived at Bonegilla (Victoria), was perplexed and disgusted by the food that was served. Remembering the vegetables offered in the hostel, Manfredi questions if they were indeed vegetables, describing the "[p]allid pastel-coloured cubes … Some were vaguely carrot-coloured; others, by their absence of colour, were probably potatoes - but who knew? They had no taste. And what was even worse, no texture. None of the food had texture" (Manfredi & Newton 1993: 11). Other conflicts in taste occurred in association with the style of cooking in the hostels and even how food was cut there and in Australia more generally: a migrant from Uruguay in the mid-1970s noted that her husband did not like the food because of the 'gravy' that tended to be put over everything. Further, "he didn't like [it] because it wasn't cooked in the way we used to cook…we [do] barbecue, and barbecuing a different way too…here they cut the ribs like that a long side while we cut in this way [motioning]; it's different and we do the barbecue with charcoal not in the gas… it's different…" (NG, 16/07/2013). Hence differences in food preparation continued to underscore not only the migrants' physical but symbolic displacement from their original locales.

An even more notorious source of migrant hostel residents' complaints was lamb or mutton, which has come to be closely associated with, and almost iconic of the low quality of hostel food. A newspaper article noted that "[o]ne of the most popular dishes among the children is a special meat loaf made from liver, kidneys, heart and other delicacies. New Australians have yet to gain a taste for mutton and lamb" (*The West Australian* 1950b). As a resident of the Woodside Hostel (South Australia) comments, the mutton had a "foul, game like odour and taste to it. We were not brought up on sheep meat" (WB, 1957). As migrant from Germany also noted, "the food was mainly, you know, it was always mutton and it put my husband, my late husband, off for the rest of his life ever eating lamb. Lamb is nice, you know; that's how bad it was" (BR, 06/02/2013). Here we see how the experiences in the hostel directly related to food, as well as the negative associations between the time spent in the hostel and particular foods, came to affect and even alter these migrants' tastes: even those who had been used to eating lamb (and whose children were game enough to eat offal!) found lamb and mutton off-putting and distasteful after spending time in the hostel. In our research and elsewhere, former migrant hostel residents frequently mention mutton and lamb, especially the smell of it pervading not only the dining rooms but also the living quarters and other parts of the hostel complex. During interviews and discussions even some fifty or more years later, their reactions typically are physical, the revulsion visible on their faces and in their body language. In their work into sensing spaces of consumption and disgust, Yvette Taylor and Emily Falconer (2015) refer to Imogen Tyler's (2013) theory of 'social abjection', where the "dirty, polluting, filthy imaginaries are tied up with the immoral, disgusting bodies and saturated with socially stigmatised meanings and values" (2015: 48). The 'foul' odour of lamb as it pervades and 'pollutes' the unwelcoming transitional space of the hostel can symbolise the underlying aversion of forced assimilation for DPs.

In another interview, a migrant from Lithuania emphasized how repulsive  the lamb in the hostel was: "Australian men they call us bloody New Australians…. And food, they think we don't know nothing, he bring like lambs or so, still with poo in, I found. When you eat you can find manure in there. So dirty, so everything dirty…European people, nobody eat because can't eat this food" (JK 26/2/15). She associates provision of unclean food by those working in or running the hostel as indicating that they thought they could fool migrants by giving them a much lower standard of food than they themselves would be willing to eat, whereas in fact she asserts Europeans simply would not tolerate unclean food, despite having come from war-torn and economically depressed locales. As another Lithuanian migrant indicated, the food “was terrible and they probably thought all these hungry people coming from Europe, you know…I think we had mutton for breakfast, lunch and dinner...” (AL, 26/02/2015). Lamb thus came to be associated with the negative attitudes of the receiving (largely Anglo-Celtic) culture toward the newly settled migrants, at an extreme as a symbol of their contempt and disdain and assumption that these migrants were lower class and desperate. Ironically, lamb more generally has high status as a key symbol of Australian culture due to the history of its production and relation to the country’s pastoral origins, and more recently its association with patriotism and nationalism (Ankeny 2008; Santich 2012), but in the context of the hostels came to be seen as a force of hostility and oppression. Here, the disgust at the poor quality of the ‘dirty’ lamb becomes entangled with ill feeling about the host culture, and a form of affective resistance to their dehumanising treatment of recent migrants.

Meat was generally problematic for many: part of the problem was with its preparation, and the lack of culinary knowledge including among migrants who began to work in the hostel kitchens in later years. As described by an Austrian migrant who arrived in his twenties, “…the lunch was too much mutton…I don’t think they cooked it the right way either, I wasn’t impressed with it...when I left, I said to myself I’ll never eat any sheep, because I never ate any sheep meat before I came here and I’ll never eat it again, although nowadays I really like a leg of lamb or something like that” (WH, 19/06/2013). Even in the 1970s-1980s during which the food improved and more attention was paid to providing multicultural offerings, Vietnamese refugees still tend to mention the meat in negative terms, especially the lamb: “At first some food was good but I didn’t get used to lamb, it was harder to eat, but later on I got used to it” (DN 11/09/2012).

For some new arrivals, the food that was served left lasting impressions because it was unfamiliar, was served out of context, or even worse. A migrant at Uranquinty Hostel

(New South Wales), for example firmly believed that eating the inside of a pineapple would kill you (Morris 2001: 72), and hence found it troubling that they were served pineapples. Remembering the food at Woodside, WB (1957) comments on the fact that Australians served “large wedges of plain cake with a layer of icing on top” for dessert. Not only was this “gross”, to use the migrants’ own words, it was also out of place and in turn was viewed as disrespectful, as cake was “always something special that you could have at special celebrations”.

Thus for former hostel residents, certain foods remain strongly associated with their impressions and memories of their time spent within these institutions. Even if food was plentiful and oftentimes of decent quality, those foods that were unfamiliar, prepared in ways that were different from those to which they were accustomed, or simply seemed to be prepared or served in a disrespectful manner provide shared ground among these migrants for negative associations in relation to hostel life.

## Conflicting Tastes

Migrants’ tastes which were in conflict with the dominant culture occasionally proved to be advantageous. As noted in a newspaper article, sour milk was preferred to fresh by migrants at one of the hostels, a fact that emerged when a consignment of 300 gallons of milk was delivered to the centre and proved to be sour. It was stressed that the migrants “like to drink it that way and they also like to prepare numerous special dishes from milk in that state…” (*The West Australian* 1950a). Commonwealth Hostels Ltd. (the governmental entity that oversaw the migrant hotels) recognised quite early on that these taste conflicts warranted attention: “The different food tastes of 10 nationalities in one hostel is a poser [an Australian term for a problem or dilemma] waiting the visit here next week of a dietitian… a dietitian investigating food and catering arrangements in hostels would arrive in Adelaide on March 10…Migrants at Glenelg Hostel this week criticised food supplied there. Mr. Connole [a regional operations officer] said the cosmopolitan nature of the group at Glenelg created catering difficulties. Every effort was made to suit the tastes of at least 10 nationalities there" (*News* 1953). In this case, different tastes and food habits were viewed as a problem, and migrants as overly demanding and perhaps even ungrateful. One migrant noted that the food was better at a second hostel where she resided: "Food was better there, yes. Because I think some of the people working in the kitchen there, I think some of them were also New Australians, so I mean you know preparing the same food but you prepare it in a different way and it tastes different, which is good" (AL, 26/02/2015). Here we see that not forcing migrants to assimilate into Australian eating habits but providing some variety of options often was received positively.

Elsewhere discontent with the food caused 'riots': Italian men threw their trays of food on the dining-room floor at the Maribyrnong hostel in Victoria in a notable incident in 1952, smashing plates and scattering cutlery: according to media coverage, "[t]hey complained loudly that the food was not palatable to them…Camp menus include some Continental foods but officials say that it is impossible to cater for all tastes" (*The West Australian* 1952). This theme recurs throughout popular media coverage, sometimes even portraying migrant tastes as odd or inappropriate: "Most men at the hostel were satisfied with meals served, but the difficulty was to suit every taste. Most Italians would eat spaghetti indefinitely, but others would not touch it. Recently three Poles ate a dog because they thought it would be good for throat and lung trouble…The menus were designed to give migrants a taste for Australian food" (*Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* 1952). Surviving hostel menus (NAA: D1917, D19/49, for example) support this statement, with a dominance of quintessential Australian foods such as white bread, meat, and boiled vegetables. The expectation was that migrants, and DPs in particular, would be thankful for the food that was provided and quickly adopt Australian foodways. The hostels clearly had a mandate to change migrants' tastes as a part of assimilating them to their new home, which was largely attempted through complete control over what and how residents ate. Set menus, served en masse in communal dining rooms, and the prohibition of cooking for oneself or one's family resulted in the dominance of a typical Australian diet and way of eating, removing the important and central role food traditionally had played in the cultural and commensal circle of the migrant family (Agutter & Ankeny 2017). In many ways food arguably was a more powerful force for assimilation than language or other cultural norms. What tastes people came to have were taken as evidence of their efforts to fit in and accept the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture.

It is notable that the British disliked 'continental' European food as much as European migrants disliked British and Australian food. Conflicts emerged between various groups of migrants and intensified in later years as hostel kitchens came to be staffed with those from Europe, many of whom had previously lived in the hostels in the immediate post-war period. A frequent complaint in contemporaneous official reports was that 'New Australians' spoiled the food: "Our first meal at Bathurst was breakfast. We got into a queue and at last reached the serving hatch. Middle Europeans slapped a dollop of semolina pudding on one plate and some meat floating around in a lot of grease on another. Few could eat it" (*Sunday Herald* 1951). A British migrant who stayed in a hostel in the mid-1950s noted in an interview with us that she disliked the food because of "all the olives in it" (JS, 07/02/2013). In one hostel, vigorous protests by British migrants against food prepared by European migrant cooks at the hostel focused on the lack of variety of food and heavy seasoning used by the cooks; after the complaints were investigated, one of the protest leaders noted that "there has been a vast improvement in the food. It is now cooked more to *our taste*" (*Goulburn Evening Post* 1951, emphasis our own).

Through these examples, we see that taste is relative but also serves as a collective norm. It emerges from past experiences and familiarities, but also provides a way of marking out one's own group as different from others, for instance in connection to food habits associated with particular religions or sects. As noted by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (2008): "Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions" (Counihan & Van Esterik 2008: 3). Food also clearly represents a way of asserting control particularly in situations such as institutions where there are few other ways to exert it (see Agutter & Ankeny 2017 for other uses of food in the hostels to exert control, such as cooking on illegal camp stoves). In the case of the hostels where residents usually could not choose what they ate, complaining about the food became a way of protesting or resisting assimilation attempts, in contrast for instance to retaining food traditions from the homeland as has been documented with other migrant groups (e.g., see Dusselier 2002 on Japanese–Americans in concentration camps during World War II).

Attempts occurred to employ British migrants especially in the hostel kitchens to help produce and serve food that was more to the taste of those in that group, but it was noted that these migrants did not want this type of work: "…if it were not for the available New Australian staffs at hostels … we would be in a serious plight so far as staffing was concerned" (NAA: SP446/1, 502/13/3, 1951-52). In the meantime, attempts were made to 'adjust' the catering to meet British 'tastes,' including reduction of the amount of meat served at breakfast time, and the introduction of kippers. However as some of our interviewees have noted, these types of menus often reflected stereotyping of tastes according to very generalised ethnic lines: in fact, the tastes of those from different regions in Great Britain often conflicted radically, as of course did individual tastes. So for instance one British migrant noted that “one thing that sticks in my mind, you used to get beautiful kippers, they used to bring in and they were huge things, proper Aberdeen kippers, beautiful things…” (JR 08/02/2013), while a couple who also came from England but who were from a Scottish background noted repeatedly that they hated the kippers (M&CM 26/03/2013).

According to some, the solution to this conflict was clear: Robert Borteux, who had been in Europe at the end of the war, wrote to the *Advertiser* (Adelaide, South Australia) to emphasize the importance of allowing all to fulfil their own tastes: “We all have different tastes. How can it be possible to satisfy everyone, especially people of different nationalities, as we found out in Germany in the displaced persons camps. There the DPs having no money, were given the food and allowed to cook it as and when they liked. Even then we had complaints about the quality of the food, although the quality and quantity was the same as the Germans themselves got. The only way to make the people happy is for them to be able to buy what they like and cook it as they like” (Borteux 1952; see also Hassam 2009 on this letter). However for various pragmatic and logistical reasons including food and fire safety as well as cost, migrants at most hostels throughout the duration of their operation were not permitted to cook for themselves.

As this chapter asserts, issues of taste were far more deep rooted than personal preference, but represented a lack of control, autonomy and perhaps even disrespect; in a Parliamentary debate about installing individual kitchens at the Gepps Cross (South Australia) hostel in 1953 (a proposal which eventually was enacted at this hostel but did not become widespread even in hostels with large numbers of British migrants), Oxford-educated lawyer, I. B. Wilson (Liberal SA) argued that “[e]very Englishman and every Australian regards his home as his castle. He wants to feel that he has a place where he and his family can be alone if they so desire. He wishes to eat meals of his own choice. If he likes his eggs soft boiled he expects them to be prepared in that way. He does not want to be served up in a community kitchen with eggs that the community cook says are correctly cooked, and which probably are according to the taste of some people, but which are wrongly cooked according to his taste" (CPDHR 19 Feb 1953, as quoted in Jordens 1995, pp. 52–3). Tastes conflict, but more importantly tastes are markers not only of choice but of the ability to choose. Hostels typically denied migrants these choices (and many others), though in this case the British migrants were supported to be able to cook their own food and hence choose for themselves.

## Conclusions

Inside the migrant hostels in Australia between the late 1940s and the 1990s, food became an "enduring artefact of resistance, social change and placemaking" (Dusselier 2002: 139). Through the control inflicted upon refugees and migrants through what and how they ate within the liminal space of the hostel system, new arrivals were deprived of any opportunities to participate in their traditional foodways or to make decisions about their consumption habits more generally, as well as having important cultural values associated with preparing and consuming food go unsupported. Therefore, we contend that food served as an artefact of resistance and change less because of conflict over what precisely was served but because of the ways in which migrants' taste preferences were undermined and attempts made to reshape these tastes as part of processes of assimilation. Food also served as a major point of conflict between groups of migrants, and hence became a way of expressing discontent as well as identity claims that were much less about food than they might first appear. The hostel thus served as a transitional space where attempts were made to shape migrants' tastes to fit within standard Anglo-Celtic norms in order to assimilate them, but which instead resulted in strong negative reactions and created uncertainties about the new place to which they had come. When migrants complain vividly about the pumpkin, gravy, and mutton that they were served decades ago in the hostel systems, they are recalling a time when they were not permitted to exercise their tastes, and when they were no longer home but had not yet arrived..

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[1] The term 'New Australian' was first coined by the Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, in the late 1940s. Use of the term was encouraged in the wider Australian society in order to replace the pejorative terms commonly in use such as 'reffo' (short for 'refugee') and 'Balt' (short name for those from the Baltic states including Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia) and

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as a symbol of assimilation; however, the term itself quickly took on a derogatory meaning although some of our interviewees continue to use it to this day in a neutral sense.

[2] The 'Australian way of life' was a rarely defined but frequently used term in official, public, and even advertising vernacular in the late 1940s-50s and referred to the idea of a quintessential and specific Australian spirit or character which was associated with certain ideals and values (see White 1981: 158–160). At this time Australians were associated with certain characteristics such as being generous, sport-loving, and egalitarian, and living a suburban life centred around the nuclear family (see Eggleston 1953: 13).

[3] Note that we are using the generic term 'hostel' to cover all forms of government-provided refugee or migrant accommodation. In reality, the accommodation centres operated in subtly different ways, they were interconnected in terms of policies and practices and had many common characteristics, with flow of migrants often occurring between them. For example,at Reception and Training Centres (such as Bonegilla in Victoria), active assimilation occurred; new arrivals were then sent to other centres such as workers' hostels (Glenelg in South Australia, for example) or in the case of dependant women and children to holding centres (such as Wacol in Queensland). A third tier of centre, the migrant hostel, predominantly accommodated family groups.

[4] As discussed later, one exception in the early period was the British-only Gepps Cross Hostel in South Australia, where kitchenettes were added due to migrant demands.