

Estonian House in Melbourne - the home of the Estonian Society in Melbourne

Background - Estonians in Australia

It can be safely assumed that people from the region recognised as Estonia have been arriving in Australia since the time of early European settlement. However, Estonian language, culture and traditions were not formally celebrated in Australia until the early 20th century when the Estonian Society of Sydney and Estonian Society in Melbourne were established in 1912 and 1914 respectively.

By 1924, nearly 200 Estonians were formally recorded as living in Australia. By 1929, this number had increased to nearly 900.

The greatest influx of Estonian immigrants occurred between 1947 and 1955, when an additional 5329 people arrived, with the vast majority being assisted refugees seeking a safe haven far from war ravaged Europe.

After settling into their new lives in Australia, the post World War II arrivals joined and expanded upon the local Estonian Societies' community groups which included sports clubs, folk dancing groups, men's, women's and mixed choirs, drama clubs, Estonian cultural/language schools, art and craft clubs, libraries, scout and girl guide troops and church congregations. These varied and highly active groups provided members of the immigrant community with the opportunity to socialise with fellow Estonians, perpetuate and promote key aspects of Estonian language, culture and traditions in Australia.

The Estonian Society in Melbourne

On 8 February 1914, during the first meeting of the Estonian Society in Melbourne, a draft constitution was approved with the purpose of the Society being "*to assemble Estonians in Melbourne and its environs for the common mutual spiritual and mutual support*". Unfortunately, this initial version of the early Estonian Society in Melbourne ceased activity six years later in 1920, remaining inactive for the next 18 years.

In 1938, the revival of the Estonian Society in Melbourne included the Society being named "Kodu" ("Home"); a name which continues to the present day.

As described above, the influx of post World War II arrivals heralded a new era for Estonian communities in Australia, including an increase in the membership of the Estonian Society in Melbourne.

The Estonian House in Melbourne

On 22 June 1951, decisions made at the Estonian Society of Melbourne AGM resulted in the Estonian House Co-operative being registered as a separate not for profit entity in December 1951. The purpose of the Estonian House Co-operative was to find a building that could become a home for the Estonian Society of Melbourne. As communicated (in Estonian) by the inaugural meeting of the Co-operative in February 1952, "*The house will be our oceanic continent's beacon to show the way, to carry and develop all the noble and beautiful things that Estonians have to offer to their fellow citizens and to pass their rich cultural origins on to their future generations*"

The money required to purchase a building was raised via a combination of community fundraising events and the sale of membership shares in the Estonian House Co-operative. Since the Co-operative is a not for profit organisation, the monetary value of each membership share does not change; it stays the same as when originally purchased. Following the conversion to decimal currency on 14th February 1966 the value of each of these membership shares was simply converted to the equivalent value in decimal currency.

The Estonian House in Melbourne – Sydney Road, Coburg

In early 1955, the Co-operative purchased a single fronted shop and residence at 67 Sydney Road, Coburg. After many months of painstaking volunteer work by community members, the building was officially opened as the Melbourne Estonian House on 4 December 1955.

The Melbourne Estonian House in Coburg truly did become the "home" (Kodu) of the Estonian community in Melbourne, with the building humming with near constant use by the various

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community groups. Due to its size, the building was limited to hosting only small scale community events, with larger events being held in halls specifically rented for the occasion.

The Estonian House in Melbourne – Melville Road, West Brunswick

In January 1970, a decision was made to search for larger premises which could accommodate the needs of the local community and in anticipation of the Estonian Society in Melbourne hosting the bi-annual Estonian Festival in Australia at the end of 1972.

In early July 1971, the Co-operative purchased the former Marco Polo cinema building at 41-43 Melville Road, West Brunswick. The money required to purchase the building was raised from the sale of the Sydney Road property, community fundraising events and the sale of additional membership shares in the Estonian House Co-operative. Since the Co-operative is a not for profit organisation, the monetary value of each membership share does not change; it stays the same as when originally purchased.

During the next 18 months, thanks to countless hours of voluntary labour, the former cinema was totally refurbished to include function spaces, meeting rooms, offices and kitchens whilst retaining key internal architectural features. Indeed, the scale and the transformation of the building was such, that during the Opening Ceremony in 1972 it was described as being on par with any Estonian House in the world.

Since 1972, in accordance with its historic intention, Estonian House in Melville Road has operated as the focal point for local Estonian cultural events, including commemorative and celebratory functions, folk dancing and choir rehearsals and concerts, drama rehearsals and plays, the Estonian language school, handicraft club, library, and scout and girl guide troops. This variety of activities has enabled members of the Estonian community in Melbourne to maintain their knowledge and experience of Estonian language, culture and traditions.

In August, 1991, the country of Estonia restored its independence, leading to the gradual easing of travel restrictions to and from Estonia. As a result, members of the Estonian diaspora including those in Australia, were able to gain direct access to their Estonian language, culture and traditions. Access which up until then, had primarily been provided by functions, rehearsals, meetings and classes held at their local Estonian House.

Since the early 2000s, the frequency of, participation in and attendance at functions, rehearsals, meetings and classes at the Estonian House in Melbourne has gradually decreased. This is due to a combination of factors including the easing of travel restrictions, the increasingly widespread use of the internet and the shifting demographic profile of the local Estonian community – from the generation of post World War II arrivals to their Australian born children and grandchildren and recently arrived temporary and permanent Estonian immigrants.

The Estonian House in Melbourne – Looking to the Future

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the Executive Committees of the Estonian House Co-operative and Estonian Society of Melbourne wish to ensure Estonian House in Melbourne remains the important community hub that it has been to date.

Therefore, these committees consider it important to plan for the future Estonian House by

- Reviewing current and future requirements
- Identifying options for the future Estonian House in Melbourne, and
- Proposing a recommended solution for the future Estonian House in Melbourne.

These activities have been scheduled to extend from early 2020 into 2021, as the Estonian community in Melbourne nears the key milestones of

- 70 years since the inaugural meeting of the Estonian House Co-operative in 1952
- 50 years since the current Estonian House was opened in 1972, and
- 30 years since Estonia restored its independence.