

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

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Beginnings of the Victorian Heritage Movement

This year, 2014, marks the fortieth anniversary of the Victorian Historic Buildings Act, the first heritage legislation passed in Australia. Without the passage of this legislation, much of Melbourne's nineteenth century architectural heritage would have been lost. As the pressures of indiscriminate development again intensify, it is worth recalling that landmark, reviewing the forces that brought it into being, and pondering its lessons for urban conservation in the twenty-first century.

The first stirrings of historic conservation in Victoria came in the early 1950s among a circle of educated upper-middle class Melburnians. 'The face of Melbourne is changing every day', Maie Casey wrote in her *Early Melbourne Architecture* (1953). 'Old buildings are fast disappearing and we felt that some record of the more distinguished should be made before it is too late.' Three years later, Casey joined Brian Lewis, Daryl Lindsay, Joseph Burke and Robin Boyd in a campaign to save 'Como', the riverside homestead of the Armytage family, a cause that also brought the Victorian Branch of the National Trust into being. The Trust's register was the first attempt to codify Victoria's heritage.

'Heritage' was an idea that appealed to those who shared the Trust's upper-middle class ambience and who preferred persuasion to protest. By the 1970s, however, the conservation movement became younger, angrier and more vociferous. New players, like the Collins Street Defence Movement and the Builders Labourers Federation, entered the fray. Young university-educated professionals formed residents' associations to save their suburbs from 'urban renewal', high-rise public housing and urban freeways. Academics researched the city's architectural history, refined the tools of analysis and trained younger heritage professionals.

Many of the leaders of architectural modernism also supported historic conservation. Robin Boyd, for example, detected a strain of moderation in the city's culture that distrusted revolutionary change. 'Victoria is never likely to produce a new architectural form, as Queensland could', he wrote in *Victorian Modern* (1947). 'She is too temperate'. The Melbourne moderns raised popular consciousness of aesthetic and urban values, including historical ones, without declaring war on the past.

Victoria was also the home of a distinctive liberalism. It believed that the state should sometimes intervene in the market in order to protect citizens from harm. Originally it stood for tariff protection, factory legislation and old age pensions. In the 1970s it embraced town planning, public health and historic conservation. Under premiers Dick Hamer and John Cain its 'quality of life' agenda secured wide cross-party support.

By the early 1970s the conflict between developers and conservationists had become critical. In 1972 the journalist John Larkins bemoaned 'the year of the wrecker in Collins Street'. 'The haste in Collins Street change, its *total*

change', he observed, 'suggests that something is out of control'. A controversy over the proposed demolition of the CBA Bank and its remarkable domed banking chamber prompted Premier Hamer to introduce the Historic Buildings Act 1974. The Historic Buildings Preservation Council (now Heritage Council) could register buildings of architectural or historic importance and grant or refuse permits to alter or demolish them. It brought experts in history and architecture together with representatives of the National Trust and the Institute of Architects, building owners and managers, real estate agents, engineers, planners and churchmen.

Today, the HBPC looks like an administrative dinosaur, but it had some valuable qualities. Through the exchange of perspectives, council members evolved shared understandings of the criteria for heritage assessment. Its public hearings ensured that its decisions were transparent and accountable. In the 1980s it surveyed the central city area, deciding which buildings should be added to the register. Later, under Planning Minister Evan Walker, a Central City Interim Development Order established parameters for heights, setbacks, density, streetscapes and overshadowing across the central city area. Historic conservation paid attention to the overall character of the city as well as to individual items. By 1990 owners of registered buildings largely knew where they stood. The bogey of heritage compensation had been dispelled. There would be new fights, of course, about façadism, overshadowing, site bonus swaps and many other issues—contests that continue to this day—but Melbourne remained a recognisably Victorian city.

This regime—of heightened public interest, huge volunteer effort, large representative councils, long hearings, ever-lengthening heritage registers—contained the seeds of its own destruction. By the 1990s the rise of market liberalism and demands for smaller government began to curb the powers of the quangos like the Heritage Council. The longer the registers became the greater the need to streamline their administration. Heritage became professionalised and managerialised. Bureaucrats made more of the decisions and the powers of the Council were trimmed. Volunteer bodies like the National Trust became more focused on their own managerial and custodial role, less able to mount grassroots campaigns. Perhaps the heritage professionals did their job too well, because many people came to assume that heritage protection no longer required their interest or effort.

Yet heritage, we must always remember, is a concept grounded in the first person plural—it is *our* heritage—and without the active engagement of the public it cannot be secured. Once again 'the hand of the wrecker' is laid on the city, and indiscriminate development threatens to obliterate the aesthetic and human values we associate with what is still, but now only just, a great Victorian city. Decisions are made by ministerial discretion and without public accountability. The design principles embodied in the Central City IDO have apparently been jettisoned. Only a revival of intellectual and political effort is likely to change things.

Melbourne's heritage is more than the sum of its individual historic buildings: it is a subtle combination of scale, style, texture and social mix that deserves to be handled with care. If the challenge of the 1970s and 1980s was to conserve the best of the city's architectural heritage, the challenge of our own day is to ensure that heritage is not left friendless on streets that no longer speak its language, respect its integrity or take inspiration from its example.

This paper draws on my chapter 'A Brief History of the Heritage Movement' in Graeme Davison and Chris McConville (eds.) *A Heritage Handbook*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney 1991; *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin 2000, chapter 6 and my 2012 Heritage Lecture, 'Heritage in Modern Society'.

