

The Australian Approach to Heritage Precinct Revitalization

The issue of conservation and appropriate ongoing management of historic country towns and city heritage precincts has developed sporadically in Australia over the past 30 years. Maldon, in Victoria, was declared Australia's first "Notable Town" by the National Trust in 1966. Heritage Legislation was introduced in the 1970s—in Victoria (1974), Commonwealth legislation (1975), New South Wales (1977) and South Australia (1978). In the remaining States and Territories this did not occur until the 1990s. This legislation provided a legal recognition and protection to significant landmark buildings, many of which had already been classified individually by the National Trust. The city of Melbourne led the rest of Australia in the early 1980s, introducing broad and sweeping conservation area controls over large sections of the inner suburbs, but these have recently been watered down by the incumbent Liberal government.

With heritage legislation now in place, the challenge in the 1990s is the management of change and appropriate enhancement of heritage precincts, whether they are officially protected by Heritage Legislation or not. Throughout Australia there are now many examples where physical improvements to heritage precincts have dramatically transformed the economic structure of once depressed and threatened environments. Precincts of national significance, such as the Rocks in Sydney, only 25 years ago were under threat from

major demolition and redevelopment proposals. Within the last decade many significant heritage precincts of national significance have been revitalised, such as the East End in Adelaide, and Fremantle in Western Australia. The change in eating habits with the introduction of outdoor cafes throughout cities (and now increasingly in country towns) has changed the nature of street usage and much more thought, attention, and financial resources are allocated to the enhancement of streets.

However, the new enthusiasm for heritage conservation has resulted in a new threat for significant precincts. The overzealous and overenthusiastic attempts of well-meaning individuals to revitalise and enhance has sometimes led to the implementation of misguided and expensive strategies at odds with the conservation of an area.

It is essential to understand the cultural significance of the place and to clarify what is important in any streetscape enhancement. The *Burra Charter* (discussed in the previous Pacific Basin issue of CRM), has assisted in guiding practitioners involved in cultural heritage management. However, this charter does not provide advice on precinct enhancement and many urban designers have little or no knowledge of the principles of heritage conservation. It is essential to work to an overall heritage precinct enhancement strategy. In many cases streetscape revitalisation proposals do not consider the totality of the street or precinct—focus is often given only to streets, with expensive urban design solutions proposed (which make major changes in the street configuration); or to the redevelopment and major upgrading of buildings, done in isolation from the context of the surrounding environment.

Heritage Surveys establish a degree of certainty and clearly identify at the outset of any precinct enhancement, the significance of sites, clarifying for the community what is important. These surveys are now a standard procedure for municipalities in most States of Australia but vary in quality and thoroughness. In certain cases, areas are now being resurveyed in response to new planning legislation which requires more detailed assessment of character. Planning legislation (which differs throughout the States and Territories

The East End, in Adelaide. Only five years ago, prior to the crash of the State Bank, this precinct was proposed for major commercial development. It is now the restaurant hub of the city with frontages conserved and restored.



Mayborough, Queensland. Known as the "Heritage City"—recent attempts to introduce planning controls to prevent timber house removal have met with much heated opposition. This house, constructed in 1919 and part of a streetscape of similar houses, has no protection and current zoning allows for inappropriate unit development.

in Australia), is now increasingly focusing on retention of "character items" with accompanying debate about property owners' rights if such neighborhood character becomes more closely controlled. This debate is not new. In Queensland and the Northern Territory, locations are only just grappling with broader heritage controls and in some instances the debate has been heated and passionate.

However, the increased attention and financial resources allocated to streetscape enhancement throughout much of Australia is evident and encouraging. Planting of regular avenues of trees, once decied and removed as nuisance material, is now wide-spread.

The burgeoning enthusiasm for restoration of individual buildings has contributed to these improved streetscapes. There is now new found enthusiasm for reinstatement of post-supported verandahs and traditional detailing to building facades throughout the country. The 1950s and 1960s in Australia saw the removal of many post-supported verandahs throughout cities and country towns. The perceived conflict between verandahs and motor cars often resulted in municipal by-laws requiring their removal but this is now being reassessed and policies and by-laws revised. Unfortunately in many traditional main streets, little consideration is given to the effect of unregulated signs. Buildings often become unrecognisable, sometimes almost totally concealed, by a jumble of brightly coloured, mismatched signs. The visual blight of many advertising and corporate signs in Australia is a widespread problem. The complete absence of billboards and the carefully regulated signage in the Hawaiian Islands are in stark contrast to the Australian situation.

Another controversial issue is that of facadism, for building retention where only the front wall of a significant building is retained. The value of the original building contributes to the unique character of heritage precincts. There are still "real" old buildings remaining to be conserved, but this could soon become a thing of the past unless more emphasis is given to true conservation and preservation of building fabric.

Traditional main streets are generally under threat from large commercial shopping centers, but in some cases this has been countered by the introduction of outdoor cafes and boutique shopping.

There are now financial initiatives at the local council and state government level to assist



with the careful management of commercial heritage precincts. Main Street Programs based on the North American model originated in New South Wales in 1988 and government led programs now exist in most states of Australia. In 1978, Heritage Advisory Services were introduced in Victoria and this program has now expanded throughout Australia. Free on-site architectural advice is provided to property owners within many significant heritage towns and suburban areas. Local committees, local municipal Councils and the Heritage Advisor now collaborate and make appropriate decisions about ongoing maintenance and care of Heritage Precincts and individual sites. In New South Wales alone, the Heritage Advisory Program now covers over 90 municipalities. It will be interesting to see whether these services, largely funded by the Federal Government will survive the severe budget cutbacks of the newly elected Liberal Federal government. At the local community level certain councils of Australia have established Local Heritage Funds to provide incentive grants and low interest loans to add to limited state and Federal Government Funds for conservation work in heritage precincts.

What is evident throughout the country is that the successful heritage precinct projects are those driven by dedicated and articulate community representatives who obtain skilled professional advice at the outset.

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