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The Potential of Neglect: Creating Authentic Spaces in the Historic Buildings of Changing Cities

Clare Chandler and Ross Turnbull

Abstract

Neglected heritage buildings are a resource of enormous potential for urban areas. Thoughtful adaptive reuse of these buildings can see them retained as affordable spaces for low-income and creative activity in rapidly changing cities. Limiting building intervention to the urgent and necessary, and prioritising the needs of future use, can have positive outcomes for building conservation, community use and interpretations of the buildings past and future. Where these buildings are government or publically owned there are unique opportunities to ensure adaptive reuse has positive outcomes for historic buildings and the urban fabric they are part of.

This paper examines the intersection of conservation, affordability and retention of social and historical meanings through the example of the South Melbourne Temperance Hall – a relatively plain nineteenth-century building in an inner-suburb of Melbourne, Australia. The recent regeneration of this building into a contemporary arts space has not been a transformation of building fabric but of use; signs of years of neglect have been left in place to minimise costs while telling a compelling story about the past, present and future of this building and its occupants. This building's story demonstrates the possible new lives of some of the more commonplace architectural legacies of nineteenth-century colonial cities and how continuing use contributes to their cultural significance and conservation.

Keywords: *heritage, built heritage, urban heritage, affordability, adaptive reuse.*

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Introduction

The South Melbourne Temperance Hall is an unassuming building. Sitting on a quiet corner of a reasonably affluent inner-suburb of Melbourne, on cursory inspection the building is not saying or doing anything very particular. Architecturally it is comfortable but aesthetically unremarkable and certainly not of a rare type – nineteenth-century civic halls of all shapes and sizes are a common colonial built legacy in Australian cities and town. The Temperance Hall certainly contributes to the historic streetscape but compared the surrounding plentiful and assiduously restored historic residential, commercial and civic buildings, it is unadorned and unpolished – even slightly shabby with flaking paint and external cracking.

These signs of wear are indicative of the building's past that has encompassed 150 years of different users and custodians, as well as periods of intensive use and, more recently, inactivity and neglect. In the building's latest iteration, its State government owners appointed Working Heritage, public-sector property managers specialising in adaptive reuse, as building custodians. A somewhat unexpected but productive partnership between us, as the building's custodians, and its new tenants – an avant-garde contemporary dance company dubbed BalletLab – has seen the gradual regeneration of the building into a contemporary arts space (Francis 2018).

This has not been a dramatic physical change; there are no alluring before and after photographs to compare decay with perfectly restored finishes. The change seen in the building today is in the energetic mix of activity now happening inside it. The conservation

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and reuse approach we deployed in tandem to this change was one contained to only the urgent and absolutely necessary. This had multiple benefits, some planned and practical and some unexpected and more ephemeral: a sustainable future for the building as an affordable place for cultural activity was created while multiple signs of its past can be interpreted in what has been left in place.

In retrospect what was taking place during this process was the creation of what architect and researcher David Littlefield (2007, 15) calls ‘the authentic building’. He writes:

‘The value of history and memory, in an architectural respect, lies not in the fact that something notable once occurred, but in the fact that notable events might continue to occur...[t]he authentic building is the one which continues to accommodate life. It grows out of its history and becomes more alive because of it, but the authentic building is not in thrall to that history.’

Although authenticity is rightly contested term in the heritage field, Littlefield’s use of it has proved useful in describing the outcomes of our approach to this building, its change and its history.

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Origins and significance

Like its name suggests, the Temperance Hall's legacy lies in the influential but now disappeared Temperance movement – powerful anti-alcohol advocates, influencers of social reform and enthusiastic builders in nineteenth-century Melbourne and many other places. The earliest parts of the building date from 1861, when the local Temperance society constructed a modest hall on the site for the purpose of providing instruction in the benefits of an alcohol-free lifestyle and related alcohol-free dances, concerts and performances (City of Port Phillip, n.d.). The double-storey building seen today from the street is the accumulation of multiple phases of construction by the Temperance society, as it expanded and modified the building to suit its growing and changing needs.

The building's construction was a minor act in a major story that has taken place across several continents and the past two centuries. This story encompasses not only the battle to control alcohol use in nineteenth-century Melbourne but also the imposition of prohibition in the United States, Protestantism as a driver of social change in the United Kingdom, and the development of the twentieth-century welfare state. It is a story with a long arc and profound effects that give this building its historical significance. The Temperance Hall building can be interpreted as a redundant relic of this powerful social force, the effects of which can still be seen throughout contemporary society. It is an interesting story and one worth telling; however, the building in-and-of itself, does not tell this story and it is certainly not the only story the building is capable of telling. Research into the building's history reveals the

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multiple users accommodated in the Temperance Hall over its history – who in turn have added their own accretions and modifications to the building and have, at points, let the building fall into disrepair.

While there is some ongoing dispute within the heritage profession as to the correct treatment of historical fabric, there is general agreement across society that great architectural works are in and of themselves worthy of preservation into the far-distant future. In addition to exemplary architecture, we now protect and conserve buildings and places without exemplary architecture for their social and historical significance – places like the Temperance Hall that are connected to influential, if largely forgotten, social movements. This building meets the lowest threshold for heritage recognition in Australia – deemed significant to its immediate local context only with the local council having planning approval responsibilities. This limited significance does however open up the building to the creation of future uses and meaning. The challenge facing managers of heritage places is how this is best done.

Creating an authentic space

In the case of the South Melbourne Temperance Hall our role as custodians spanned project management of conservation work to finding an appropriate new user for the neglected and near dormant building. Our initial need to arrest deterioration and ensure the building's safety led us to focus on the urgent and absolutely necessary but not much more. With the building made safe and just usable a new compatible user was found – in this case a creative

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organisation that valued the building's very well developed patina and had a clear vision for its future.

With a user in place some detritus was removed, and some left in place. Where practical, the building was made partially accessible to people with disabilities. The most dramatic new addition was purely practical – the installation of new, accessible toilets and showers. There was very little traditional conservation work – underground drainage was fixed to arrest structural damage but wear and decay was left in place. The new tenants were encouraged to add their own layers – and these involved nods to the past and the future. What happens in the building today is an energetic but compatible mix of rehearsals, meetings, performances, studio hire, events and accommodation. Much of this activity was able to start taking place before the building was finished – a state this building will likely never be in.

A practical benefit of this low-level of intervention and conservation that is obvious but worth noting are the cost savings. The things that did not prevent use of the building were left unrepaired: cracked and missing plaster, peeling paint, worn timber and unsympathetic paintwork. By not addressing these effects of the building's age and its varied history, the project costs were kept under control and the need to recoup them through a commercial rent avoided. This opened up the possibilities for the building's use and made community and creative uses viable. It was the history of the building's neglect that made these choices about the level of intervention possible.

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This speaks to Jane Jacobs' observation that cities need buildings that not only vary in age, but also vary in condition. What they need, and what creative activity and small enterprises particularly need, she writes is 'not old buildings in an excellent and expensive state of rehabilitation...but also a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings, including some rundown buildings' (Jacobs 1961, 187). These plain, ordinary, rundown historic buildings often organically become generators of interesting community and cultural activity – for this activity to move on when these spaces become more enticing to the property market. An accumulation of neglect, architectural ordinariness and low-level heritage significance are in themselves worth protecting.

Positive adaptive reuse

The shadow of adaptive reuse, whether directed by government or the commercial sector, is often displacement, commodification and gentrification; the 'price [is] high in respect to both costs and consequences' when it comes to 'optimal restoration and reconstruction' (Corten et al. 2014, 66). Victory in the battle to preserve local cityscapes such as Georgetown, Penang or Millers Point in Sydney often has gentrification as the unintended consequence where the very residents for whom the place holds cultural significance are displaced by new residents and businesses with more financial resources, and short-stay accommodation for tourists replaces long-term residential tenancies leaving the "protected" urban fabric as a memorial to its former social life and community.

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But reuse occurs affordably in many different contexts – elderly buildings are constantly reused and reformed, often not by governments or developers, in a process that has been called ‘vernacular adaptation’ (Plevoets and Sowińska-Heim 2018). A building like the Temperance Hall has been in a process of vernacular adaptation since it was built, and certainly since it reached obsolescence with the decline and disbandment of the Temperance movement in the mid-twentieth century. Here it is artificial – a deliberate contrast to the buildings around it. It is a luxury of government but also an opportunity to provide these exceptions to the prevailing market that have a value for day-to-day use rather than tourism or high-end retail.

Visible histories

An unexpected and more ephemeral benefit of this “light touch” conservation and intervention has been the way it leaves multiple histories of the building legible on its surface. Traces like partially revealed signs act as what Littlefield call ‘poetic clues’ to the building’s pasts. There is evidence of at least four different building names on exterior signage for the time being will all stay. As much as there are both clear and more obscured physical reminders of the Temperance Society, there are signs of 1980s theatre groups – as well as countless other anonymous human bumps and scrapes. It is the accretion or multiplicity that is lost when historic buildings are fully restored or recreated – that is, returned to a single earlier point in time. Littlefield (2007, 57) notes that perfect restoration

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can make a building 'so completely out of time, devoid of a human presence or of any kind of life, it is of dubious value'.

Italo Calvino (1974, 10) enigmatically sums up the nature of buildings and places as repositories of cultural memory in *Invisible Cities*:

'the city does not not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turns with scratches, indentations, scrolls.'

By deliberately allowing the building to show its 'scratches, indentations, scrolls', its cracks and its ghost signs we allow both the user and the passer-by to experience the city without interpretation. For the past user, the building and the street may provoke specific cherished memories whereas for the recent arrival, such a place can still offer a sense of connection to the past and the sense that the life of the city is one of continuity, of the generation of new stories, new attachments.

The Temperance Hall is recognised for its social significance and the approach taken to its conservation is one that sees this social significance not as a past attribute to be memorialised but as a living, continuing trait to be fostered – the authentic building Littlefield describes.



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This is done through its use as a place of creative practice and performance already embedded in the local community and which will develop further connections over time as the new tenant puts down roots and unfolds its own history in and of this place. In the conservation and adaptive treatment of the building fabric, we have taken the idea of “palimpsest”, the way in which a place features visible traces of its history – the accretions, the markings, the decay and patina of age that accumulate over time, to be a critical concept for the retention of cultural significance.

Conclusion

The clear implication of this approach is that a socially significant building's appearance is not possessed of an ideal form, nor can it ever be fixed in a single state. The continuing use and social life of the building will make further marks and precipitate further adaptive changes. Some of our cities most valuable heritage resources are those without significance – or with just enough significance to be left alone. The Temperance Hall is just one building, but working with it and its users has been instructive – in becoming advocates for the un-extraordinary, and for its potential future value.

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