

Heritage Places: loved or lost?

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Intro

Heritage, and in particular built heritage, seems to polarise the community: You either love it or hate it; understand it or don't; take it or leave it.

Built heritage tends to be most in the public eye – it is out there for all of us to see, often on a daily basis. Although it provides us with a direct physical connection to our past – something we can all share in – it is also the source of much emotion and misunderstanding.

When dealing with built heritage at a professional level, these issues come to the fore. We need to be able to make decisions that are objective and rational. We have to decide what to keep and what to discard. Even with tools of the trade, some decisions are still complicated.

What is heritage?

Formal heritage protection began in South Australia with the establishment of the Register of State Heritage Items in 1978 to protect and preserve places considered to be of significance to the whole South Australian community. In 1993 the Development Act made provision for the protection of Local Heritage Places.

As you can see, since that time only about 10,000 places have been formally protected because they have some heritage values that are deemed to be worthy of protection.

This is really only a very tiny fraction of the building stock of the state, even when narrowed down to what most people would consider to be 'heritage' (such as places over 100 years old).

How we choose what to keep

A large proportion of State Heritage Places were entered in the Register as the result of regional heritage surveys commissioned over a number of years and undertaken by a variety of consultants.

In the days before the advent of local heritage places, it seemed that anything 'old' was worthy of listing – there was no other way to protect places other than putting them in the State Heritage Register. There was no real standard by which places could be judged – each consultant had their own opinion.

In 1993 the new Heritage Act provided for criteria by which places were to be assessed. At last, a way of assessing places on an objective basis.

...but... the criteria do not provide the complete answer to determining what should be kept and what should be let go.

Why some places have to go

Although the criteria provide some formal guidance to the approach to assessment, there are some situations where their application can be less straightforward. A few examples will serve to illustrate some of the problems.

Community values and public perception

Fernilee Lodge was the subject of much public outcry in the months leading up to its demolition. Many people came forward with strong opinions and emotions about what they saw as the heritage significance of the place: '...but it's where I got married...' It was obviously important to them personally and they saw it as part of their heritage. The building also represented what most people would see as a 'typical' heritage place – it was a large, relatively ornate house, sitting on a large allotment.

This concept of a place being of value to a 'community' is one that can be quite tricky, and obviously fraught with emotion. Community values are represented by criterion (f) which states that a place may have 'strong cultural or spiritual associations for the community or a group within it.' To the group of people who got married or had their wedding receptions there, Fernilee Lodge was an important place, marking a significant event in their lives.

However, when applying this criteria, some questions are immediately raised. How 'strong' is strong, and how do you measure that, and if the 'community' means the whole population, how narrowly do you allow a 'group within it' to be defined?

The place should also be one which the community or group have held in high regard for an extended period. That group or community should also be one which is widely recognised. The 'group' of people who got married at Fernilee Lodge cannot be considered to be a widely recognised group within the South Australian community, and their association with Fernilee Lodge was relatively short lived.

The Catholic community's association with St Francis Xavier Cathedral is a better example of the application of this criterion, as is the National War Memorial on North Terrace, which is the focus of regular community remembrance of those killed in war.

Integrity

When assessing places, we often have to think about how well a place tell its story – ruins are all well and good, and in many cases 'romantic', but how

does their lack of integrity affect their ability to convey the story of their past? How much can a place be modified before it loses its significance? The Regent Cinema in Adelaide is a good example of this.

It was one of the grand cinemas of Australia and in the late 1920s when it was built, was the most modern in South Australia, reflecting much of the optimism and glamour of the industry at the time, decorated with lavish materials and elaborate fittings and furnishings.

It was significantly altered in the 1970s with the construction of the Regent Arcade.

The assessment of this place was problematical. When considering its heritage value the significant and unsympathetic alteration had to be taken into account, including:

- the removal of the main foyer and entrance area to accommodate the arcade
- the removal of the stalls area in its entirety (again for the arcade), which had seating for 1262, more than half the capacity of the cinema
- the removal of the decorative proscenium arch, the 'boxes' adjacent to it, the original screen area and the orchestra pit

On the one hand, the cinema marked an important state in the development of cinemas and movie-going in SA, being built on a lavish scale not seen in this state previously (or since). It represented a style of movie-going no longer practised and the remaining ornate plasterwork was of a quality not found elsewhere in this state.

On the other hand, it is true to say that the cinema was virtually obliterated by the arcade development. Although the remaining dress circle area still gave an impression of the grandeur and scale of the space, there was little left of its original form, little remaining to illustrate the full theatre experience that was intended by its designers – grand foyer, marble staircases, lobbies, artwork, discreet lighting and the massive auditorium focussing on the distinctive and elaborate proscenium arch surrounding the screen. It was difficult, therefore, to justify listing of the space only for the preservation of the remnant ornate plasterwork.

All that is now listed is the façade of the building that once housed the cinema, which begs the question: is it better to have some 'reminder' of the presence of a place, or are we not being honest about the reality – that this is really 'facadism' and merely serves to remind us that the cinema existed – it doesn't really tell us much about the actual experience of seeing the movies in the grand auditorium.

Association

Many places are considered important because they are associated with a significant person or event. Criterion (g) states that a place may be of

heritage value because it 'has a special association with the life or work of a person or organisation or an event of historical importance.

In the case of a person's home, for example, their association with the place must be more than brief or incidental, and should be demonstrated by that place. It is not enough to say that 'so and so lived here', that the place was built for them or by them, or that they died in the house. Two key words in the criterion point to this. Firstly the person must have been of importance and secondly, the association is 'special'. Historians will rightly vary in their judgements of what is historically important, while defining 'special association' can be equally difficult. It has been suggested that 'special' means out of the ordinary.

In essence, the place needs to throw light on a significant aspect of the lives of people in the past, on what it was that made them important.

A house in East Terrace, Adelaide, meets this criterion. It was the family home of William and Lawrence Bragg, the father and son joint recipients of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1915. Theirs is the only Nobel Prize for Physics ever awarded to Australians.

The house, designed by William Bragg, was their family home for nine years, a formative time for both William and Lawrence. Lawrence completed his schooling and tertiary education and his father continued in his first professional position and began the experiments in X-rays that were to bring him and Lawrence the highest of accolades.

Although the actual work which earned father and son the Nobel Prize was undertaken after they had returned to England in 1909, the groundwork of education, teaching and researching was done in Adelaide, part of which time was spent at this house. It is likely that most of this work was undertaken at the University of Adelaide, although it is also likely that the house was an integral part of this process – the homework, checking of research notes and social and family activities which supported the Bragg's scientific creativity.

However, the house in Kensington Park that was the residence of Sir Donald Bradman, would not meet criterion (g). Bradman moved to Adelaide from Sydney in 1934 to commence employment with stockbroker Harry W Hodgetts. Bradman died here after a bout of pneumonia in early 2001.

Bradman is internationally renowned as one of Australia's cricketing greats. He made his debut with the Australian cricket team in the 1930 tour of England, breaking records from the time he stepped onto the pitch. He later captained Australia and continued to break records throughout his cricketing career. Bradman's total of 117 first-class centuries (including 37 double centuries) is still a record for any Australian.

His importance is therefore not in question. But the house in which he lived the later part of his life bears no direct relationship with the reason why Bradman is important.

Although the house is associated with Bradman during a large part of his time as a cricketer, it does not in its own right, say anything of importance about Bradman and his cricket, except that he lived most of his life in an average house in a quiet suburb. The Adelaide Oval, the venue for Bradman's later cricketering career, better represents the life of Don Bradman, the cricketer.

The commonplace vs the rare

When looking at potential State Heritage Places that are of a type that are commonplace, we need ask ourselves how much more is that particular place telling us about SA's past. When faced with a place that is one of many such places around the state, what is it in particular that makes that place special – what 'gap' does it fill in our knowledge of that particular type of place.

Criterion (d) provides one way of looking at places of which there are numerous examples: a place may be 'an outstanding representative of a particular class of places of cultural significance.'

However, applying this criterion is not as simple as it may at first seem.

Firstly, it requires a judgement as to what constitutes a 'class of places' – all mines, or just copper mines, or just open cut mines, for example.

Secondly, we need to consider how sensible is it to use this criterion if the class of places is very small. Only 3 roundhouses were ever built by the South Australian Railways – do these count as a 'class' of places in their own right, or should we be applying criterion (b) which describes rare or endangered qualities? Should we be keeping them all in case one is lost through fire or similar?

Thirdly, we need to make a judgement as to what constitutes an 'outstanding representative' of that class of places. Making that assessment in turn requires a very good knowledge of the State's built form and, in an ideal world, a set of thematic and typological studies that does not currently exist.

Should there be a 'buffer' for rare places – whaling stations meet criterion (b) as representing an activity no longer practised, but how many do we need to keep to represent whaling in SA?

Does a one-off, such as the manure pits, at Brownhill Creek, represent a significant aspect of South Australia's history?

Conclusion

The State Heritage Register is intended to be the 'essence' of South Australia's heritage and history – important to all South Australians.

The application of criteria, when assessing places of state significance, has allowed the assessment process to be a little more exact. But it also

highlights the inherent difficulties in attempting to make consistent and 'objective' assessments.

There is no question that heritage is important to us all, but, unless we can change fundamental attitudes to the retention and re-use of our historic building stock, the reality is that we can't save as much of it as many in the community would wish.