

## **NEERG Seminars - The Fundamentals of Heritage 06 May 2010**

CPD Assessment Task

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Prepare a short 400-500 word commentary for each of the two sessions of the seminar.

### **MORNING**

#### **Speakers: Peter Mould, Mary-Lynne Taylor, Michael Neustein, Paul Rappoport, Phillip Thalys**

Peter Mould highlighted that heritage registration for a building should inspire new design not constrict it, a successful example being The Mint. Very contemporary architecture can work very successfully with heritage listed buildings as long as the heritage building is given some space and the new building defers to the old.

Peter pointed to the Sydney Opera House as a good example to illustrate how a very significant building can move forward with the times. Utzon accepted that things change over time and that a building can do the same, the loggia, for example being in response to current needs of the building. The lesson with the Opera House is that a great building doesn't need to remain the same in order to continue to be a great building.

Mary-Lynne Taylor highlighted that it was no use having a heritage item unless it is known and celebrated. It was important to see the building both from the outside and the inside. Mary-Lynne felt that paying the owners of a privately owned heritage listed building a fee on listing, say \$5000, could go towards helping them maintain it and also compensate for letting the public through the building at least once a year. A privately owned heritage listed building can be a big issue for the owner as they are expensive to maintain and limited in how they can be changed. It can be a liability to the owner and in NSW 85% of heritage listed properties are privately owned.

Mary-Lynne also noted that heritage is for the elite in many ways. Not only is it the educated who tend to appreciate it more, it is the better off who can afford to maintain it. There was a need for more education in schools to teach the community to value its heritage buildings.

Paul Rappoport talked about a number of key issues related to heritage listing and also the Productivity Commission Report (2006) Heritage NSW. Paul noted the need for Local Councils to list heritage items within their Local Government Areas and the fact that they didn't have the time or money to do it properly. He recommends instead that an independent Heritage Listing Authority should be established run by heritage professionals. The lists from the Authority could then be supplied to Government who could choose to take buildings on or off that list for various reasons, however the process should be transparent.

Paul feels the main issue behind the Productivity Commission was the plight of the individual owner, and the difficulties they face when owning a heritage listed building. The Commission recommended a relaxing of controls over heritage buildings and could result in increased demolition and increased rights of appeal. He felt it also allowed Strategic Planning ideals to be dominant over heritage concerns. Paul emphasised that this importance being placed on the owners and their financial position at a particular time is ridiculous when these owners will change over time while the heritage significance of the building does not. This is one of a string of owners over time, so in the long term philosophical view, Paul asks if it is really necessary to consider this.

Another issue facing the longevity of privately owned heritage buildings is society's shift in mores and values due to changing demographics, among other things. Where once it was common to renovate your new home, it is now more common to demolish the house and start again. Economic

conditions are also driving this in a situation where the home is a person's superannuation so owners want to maximise its value.

On another topic, Paul recommends Proactive Thematic Heritage Listings, i.e. thinking of buildings in broader heritage groups rather than just as one building. Looking at hospitals, Post Offices or Schools together, for example, and doing comparative analysis between the buildings in the group, assists you to know how when one building is altered, it affects the whole group.

Finally, the session concluded with Philip Thalys and his preference for 'history' rather than 'heritage'. Philip does not believe heritage should sterilize a building or place so as not to allow change. Cities are dynamic, changing and growing entities. Like cities, Philip feels we need to work more with evolving buildings rather than knocking them down. This approach adds to the richness of buildings and cities alike.

Working with a 'heritage' listed building, Philip emphasises, must involve looking at the actual building rather than the 'style' it is supposed to fall into. New building should then respond to that building in appropriate ways which may not mean the new has to be smaller or recessive to the old.

Architecture and urban design should be about interpreting a site's history and making that history part of a living city today, without undue nostalgia. The vision for a place or building with significant history or heritage value should be as forward looking as it is backwards.

## **AFTERNOON**

### **Speakers: Howard Tanner, Trevor Howells, James Phillips and Jennifer Hill**

According to Howard Tanner, the initial flourish of heritage conservation has passed and now we need to work out a direction for heritage conservation in the future. In the past the conservation idea for many heritage buildings was to restore them to their original state and to then use them as museums about that use. This idea, however, has limited application and is rarely financially viable. The heritage buildings use generally needs to generate the income required to maintain the building and museums rarely do. Moving forwards, a more versatile approach to allow new uses into heritage buildings needs to be embraced. A successful example in Sydney is Garden Island where it has evolved into a successful modern working environment with its history interwoven throughout.

The finest adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, such as seen at Paddington Reservoir and The Mint, demonstrate exciting and innovative marriages of the old and the new. Alternately, the old structure can be separate, with a new structure supporting the use of the buildings today, in an adjacent building such as at NSW Parliament or Curzon Hall. The ongoing financial sustainability of a heritage building needs to be achieved through the buildings uses and a realistic commercial perspective is needed. St Patricks Seminary at Manly is a good example of this.

Another method of heritage building preservation that the Historic Houses Trust is looking at is the concept of leasing the building to private residents who maintain the building but agree to open it to the public regularly, such as with Bronte House.

Howard emphasises that overall more heritage experts are needed with architectural knowledge in order to understand what can be appropriate uses and modifications in light of the buildings ongoing financial sustainability. There needs to be an understanding of what is really significant. There is a difference between the need for pure conservation of a heritage building, which is very rare, and adaptive reuse, where the reuses will fund the ongoing maintenance of the heritage building. Positive examples of adaptive reuse reveal the intervention in their design, the new is expressed against the old. Key to successful adaptive reuse, Ballast Point is a good example, is often that a fresh eye needs to be taken to these sites and a new life given.

Trevor Howells discussed Federation Architecture in Australia. It was enlightening to understand that the 'real thing' is actually 'quite mad', playful, changing and free. Face brick work, the roof, and detailing, patterning and windows including a great variety of changes often all in one building. Examples such as the Appian Way in Burwood revealed themselves as being wonderful examples of this, as did the more modest manifestation in Haberfield. Trevor emphasised that the use of materials really defines this style, including face brick and lots of fine timber work. Overall Federation houses were very picturesque externally, but inside were very dark and virtually unacceptable for today's standard of living.

James Phillips presented the Interwar period of architecture in Australia between 1918-1941, a period of liver bricks and California Bungalows. The style was influenced by both USA architecture as well as that from the United Kingdom. On the one hand the houses still had a lot of patterning and details, often including quite 'mad' combinations and being quite over the top. The wonderful analogy of a house being rolled in a tray of all the patterns and details around, like a lamington, is memorable. Separately, the more simple Californian bungalows with big simple roofs emerged.

James presented the Outlook Estate in Denistone which was built between 1920-1960 as a case study of the Interwar period. The development had a covenant requiring brick construction and tile or slate roofs, and was designed for middle class people. The more modest houses demonstrated the incorporation of the side entry which reduced the need for corridors. The houses were often quite 'quirky' as they were generally not architecturally designed. Front fences received attention.

The houses of Outlook Estate are, like many houses built between the wars, very modest by today's living standards. It is a challenge to understand the future of these houses because of this.

The final speaker of the day was Jennifer Hill presenting Post World War 2 Architecture and the Emergence of Modernism. This type of architecture is generally not well preserved in Australia and in the past has often been demolished for new building. Leading Sydney practitioners include Sid Anchor and, later, Harry Seidler. One of the most important features of this new style in houses was a very open and simple plan which was very different to the preceding house styles. Jennifer Taylor in her writing about Seidler's Rose Seidler House points to this house as the fundamental turning point where the open plan was introduced to the home in Australia. This change can be understood as a move away from classically defined spaces in houses preceding this time while the modern era saw free flowing spaces.

In commercial building, Seidler's Australia Square amalgamated 56 separate sites to take a whole city block. Seidler did not see the value in the city fabric but does see the value in the spirit of the times and this is reflected in Australia Square. 'Modern' architecture incorporates a wide range of styles and to understand its value it is often necessary to think of the spirit of the times. The spirit of the times also included embracing new technology and mass produced products. This was a new and untested area so inevitably the new material also sometimes failed. For this reason many modernist buildings have not lasted well over time.

Jennifer Hill suggests that the Heritage Council requires more study on Modernism in order to understand it and then protect it where appropriate. She recommends that buildings be looked at not as individual elements, but rather in the context of all the work of that architect, to understand their value. Understanding Modernism involves understanding subtle details about planning, special flow and detail. This subtleness means it is sometimes difficult to identify quality Modernist buildings from the style-less copies.