

## THE CHALLENGES, CONFLICTS AND OUTCOMES OF MANAGING TWENTIETH CENTURY OBSOLESCENCE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

The challenge of obsolescence seems to affect most profoundly places that were created to house industrial functions at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Examples abound of structures from the same era, which retain their ongoing use or have been adapted for a new use, including judicial, government and commercial buildings, railway stations and residential apartments. However it is the large industrial complexes from those years, which are no longer in use, that are providing enormous challenges.

In Britain, the heritage-listed Battersea Power Station remains a monument to obsolescence with its tall chimneys dominating the urban landscape. With its roof removed and its equipment gone it is an abandoned shell that lost out to the more amenable Bankside when it came time to house the TATE Modern gallery. Yet throughout the world there are palaces, churches, castles, and other large complexes whose custodians have managed their obsolescence successfully. It is fascinating to visit these places because each one has a story to tell – one that is ingrained in the fabric of the local and wider culture. This, I think, is the primary challenge to managing twentieth century obsolescence – that the story of these places is not (yet) a significant part of our culture. It is only appreciated and understood by a small group of people and this translates into a lack of funding both at a government and corporate level. Nonetheless Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra for example have achieved award winning adaptive reuse of obsolete power stations while Perth has not.

Western Australia is an interesting place to practice as a heritage architect. The renowned boom and bust cycle is written indelibly in the fabric of the place with exceptional urban streetscapes such as Fremantle's West End a testament to the Gold Boom of the 1880s. The flow-on effect of this first significant mining boom resulted in the construction of large infrastructure projects in the early years of the twentieth century. Two of these provide case studies into the challenges, conflicts and outcomes of managing twentieth century obsolescence in Western Australia. Both case studies are located in the capital city of Perth – the power station in East Perth and to the extensive Midland Railway Workshops west of the city. Less than one hundred years after their construction these complexes were abandoned and their futures uncertain.

The long delay in finding new uses for both these places can be partially explained by the political divides in Western Australia. On the one hand there is the depth of labour history associated with both places and on the other hand they were both closed (in the case of the Workshops very contentiously) by conservative governments. While bipartisan support has been found for the proposed demolition of heritage icons in WA (notably The Cliffe, a remarkable house, which is the only place in WA to have been voted off the State Heritage Register by both houses of parliament, and the demolition of the home of the former Premier Sir Charles Court, which went with barely a whisper) such bi-partisan support is rarely found for the conservation of obsolete industrial sites. However, the challenges facing these sites are far more complex than simplistic political divides, and it is this range of issues that I want to explore.

### EAST PERTH POWER STATION

The East Perth Power Station commenced operation in 1916 and is one of the few remaining industrial sites on the Swan River. It was strategically located close to the city on the banks of the river, where water could be easily pumped in and out, and adjacent to the railway line for an

easy supply of coal. Established by the first Labor government in Western Australia, it is especially important for its representation of all phases of power generation in the State until its decommissioning in 1981.<sup>1</sup> Selected as the site of the new Western Australian Museum, its future is now uncertain and it remains a mothballed reminder of the challenges of managing obsolescence.

The East Perth Power Station was not heritage-listed until almost fifteen years after decommissioning because of a fundamental lack of appreciation of its heritage significance at a political level. However, it is not just a lack of appreciation of heritage values that can adversely impact on a heritage place, sometimes fundamental misinterpretation by heritage professionals can have a similarly negative impact. For example a heritage study carried out in 2001 identified the Blacksmiths' Shop (c. 1910) at the southern end of the Power Station as 'intrusive' and added this building to the lowest rung of significance in the complex. A reading of James Semple Kerr's writings on the varying levels of significance clearly identifies that 'intrusive' is not a level of significance at all, but is an indicator of visual intrusiveness; in fact a structure may be both highly significant while also visually intruding upon another significant structure.<sup>2</sup> This subtlety was lost and so was the building - along with all the other structures on the lower rungs of significance. This has resulted in a site that retains its significant structures like sculptures in the landscape that can no longer be read as a part of a working complex of numerous buildings and activities. Therefore a particular challenge for the master planning has been how to reintroduce built form in a way that will reinforce the urban fabric and allow the Power Station to be a part of the city and not a slowly degrading memorial to obsolescence.

The East Perth Power Station presents a particular challenge in that, unlike the majority of power stations around the world that have been heritage-listed, it retains most of its equipment in its grand turbine hall and in the associated frequency changer building. It is this equipment along with the remaining industrial structures that has the ability to transform our understanding of the power station and to tell its story.

When the site came under the purview of the East Perth Redevelopment Authority, some twenty years after its closure, attempts were made to plan for its future in a holistic way and the (Labor) government committed over \$10million dollars to stabilizing the external fabric of the power station with a view to its long-term conservation. In 2004, a draft master plan was produced and this was followed by the decision to relocate the Western Australia Museum to the site and its future appeared secure.

The master planning process was a collaborative one that considered environmental, social and economic outcomes in a detailed way. The retention of significant equipment was integral to the plan. As part of this process the East Perth Redevelopment Authority commissioned a series of recordings with both engineers and former workers at the Power Station, which at its optimum employed around 250 people. It is their stories, such as the descriptions of the 'posh' entry (where engineers entered by the upper level balustraded walkway, while workers entered at the basement level) and the tales of covering for work mates in the local 'footie' team (who rested up on the flat roof of the boiler house prior to the game), which adds a richness to our appreciation of the Power Station that can not be told by the structures alone. Gone is the blanket of ash that often covered the working class suburb and that is a good thing, but the history of our industrial heritage remains an important story to tell.

With the change of State government to a minority Liberal-National coalition in late 2008, the proposed new Museum project was scrapped and the master plan team was reconvened. The new political vision was to find a future for the Power Station that was not a 'huge drain on

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<sup>1</sup> *East Perth Power Station*, Heritage Council of Western Australia Register of Heritage Places Documentation, Database No. 3318.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Kerr, *The Conservation Plan*, The National Trust (NSW), Sydney, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2000.

taxpayers'.<sup>3</sup> Coming as it did at the time of the global financial crisis this has added an additional challenge to the team. While the proposed Museum use had its own challenges in regards to the successful re-use of the Power Station, such as compatibility with the Museum's program and the difficulties of adapting the existing structure to meet current display requirements, these challenges were never fully explored. The latest master plan, which is still at a conceptual stage, has revisited the challenges facing the site and now focuses on a variety of possible uses, with the retention of the Power Station buildings and equipment at the core of a revitalized urban development.

The retention of obsolete, but highly significant equipment necessitated an exploration of how to integrate the external and internal planning with the areas containing very large and for the most part immovable equipment. There are very few precedents for how this might be done successfully. Indeed our case studies revealed that many obsolete industrial structures have not retained their associated industrial equipment. This meant that different strategies, such as well-placed additions and extensions, will be particularly important to facilitate activation of the site, which is an important component of the interpretation planning for the Power Station. This is an innovative approach in contrast to many other adapted power stations, which use the large (mostly empty) internal spaces to create interest and often isolate the buildings from the surrounding urban fabric. This is the challenge we now intend to fully explore. It is almost thirty years since decommissioning and there is a way to go yet, but hopefully we will be celebrating the new life of the East Perth Power Station in the not too distant future.



Fig. 1: East Perth Power Station showing the now demolished Blacksmiths' Shop c 1920. (Courtesy State Electricity Commission ACC2242.9)

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/WACabinetMinistersSearch.aspx?ItemId=131260&minister=Barnett&admin=Barnett>

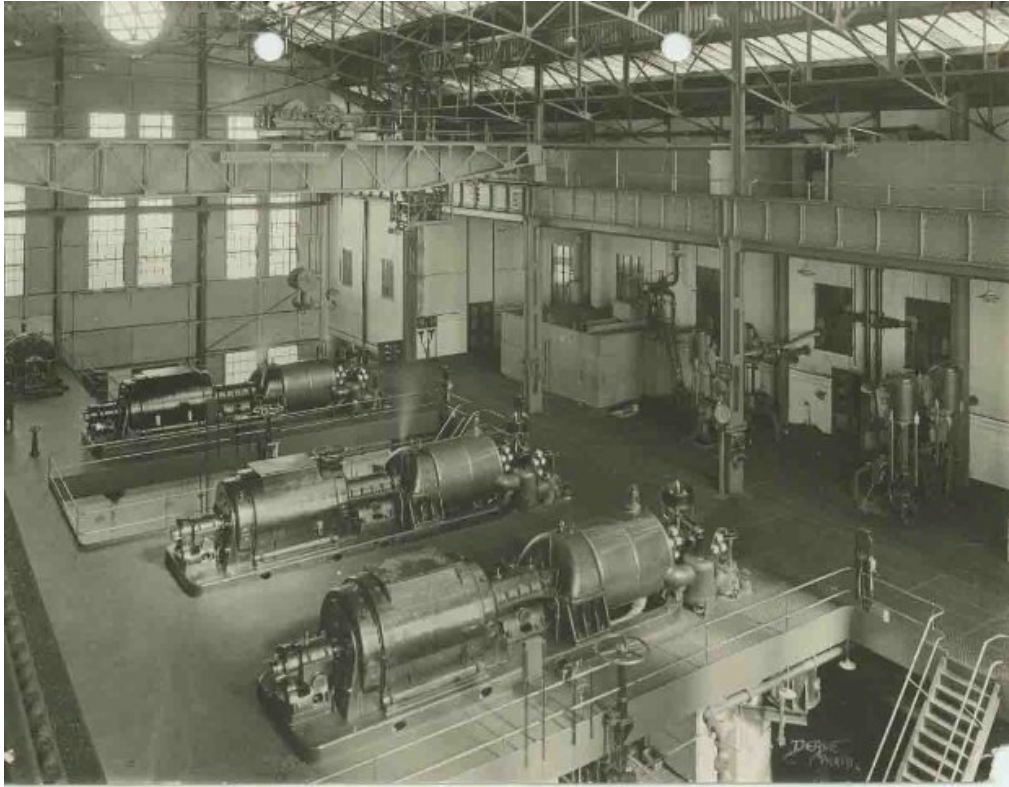


Fig. 2: East Perth Power Station Turbine Hall c. 1920 ((Courtesy State Electricity Commission ACC2229)

## MIDLAND RAILWAY WORKSHOPS

The Midland Railway Workshops comprise what is considered the most important group of early twentieth century brick industrial buildings in Western Australia. It retains a substantial collection of industrial equipment, much of it unique to the workshops. From 1904 to 1994 the Workshops were the largest industrial workshops in the State with a highly skilled and diverse workforce of up to 3,500 people.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of reinvigorating the Workshops, which once formed the economic and social hub of the region, has involved a complex dialogue between heritage specialists, environmental scientists, planners, engineers and the place managers.

The challenges have been extraordinary for this site, which was transferred to the Midland Redevelopment Authority in 2001 with the virtually no start up funding. Nevertheless the work carried out to date has been of such high standard that the World Bank representatives at the International Conference on Impact Assessment (held in Perth in 2008) noted it as an important case study.

While guided by extensive conservation planning and a well-developed heritage strategy, the planning for the site has demonstrated the difficulties inherent in managing complex sites. In particular much of the early planning exposed the great divide between heritage and non-heritage views of heritage and redevelopment. Some of this divide can be explained, in my view, by the technical language often employed by the heritage profession. While specific and defined technical language is important in any professional field, conflict can occur when that language is

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<sup>4</sup> P. Bertola and B. Oliver, *The Workshops: A History of the Midland Railway Workshops*, University of Western Australia Press, 2006.

alienating rather than inclusive with the result that positive outcomes are harder to achieve. One example is the use of the word 'aesthetic' in relation to an industrial site. The layperson's understanding of 'aesthetic value' rarely extends to industrial buildings, but when described in other terms such as 'a simple and robust piece of architecture' or a 'fine, symmetrical building' then the appreciation can be shared. This was certainly the case in our work at the Midland Railway Workshops.

One tool that we used to improve an understanding of the 'aesthetic values' of the workshops was to provide a visual and written analysis of the built typologies evident there. This analysis identified industrial, ancillary and administrative types of buildings and their primary characteristics. This improved appreciation resulted in the retention of a number of timber-framed ancillary buildings, which until then were not considered as contributing the character of the workshops in the same way that the brick buildings and were earmarked for demolition. This analysis has proved invaluable in terms of guiding possible future development. For example a new police complex, which had been built adjacent to the Workshops with the intent of respecting the architecture of the Workshops, but somehow looked incongruous. Our study found that in addition to breaking the strong geometry of the site layout, the 'heritage' style roof pitches were in fact ten degrees steeper than most of those found at the Workshops. This kind of detailing can be prevented in the future by the clear design guidelines that have now been developed for the site.

Another example of a conflict that further demonstrates the challenges of managing obsolescent sites arose in regards to the future of the Gatehouse. This former Receiving Shop was relocated across from the Timekeepers Office in 1924 and created a narrow, controlled entry to the site. It stood in the way of the proposed new entry road, but its demolition was not in accordance with the heritage strategy and the two opposing positions seemed irreconcilable. Rather than 'take a side' in the battle, we spent a considerable amount of time working with the planning team on assessing the access needs, developing 'way finding' strategies and refining the access plans for the site. It turned out that while a new improved access to the site was important, this was not the place to do it, a more logical roadway was located further to the east. Furthermore, it was found that it would be necessary to slow the traffic down near the location of the Gatehouse so that the pedestrians accessing the workshop buildings would be safe. The historic purpose of the Gatehouse provided the perfect solution for the future needs and the issue was resolved.

The Midland Redevelopment Authority has put in place a detailed impact assessment process for all work at the site and has developed an innovative approach of engaging with people in the education and creative industries, who are already shaping the future of the place. Furthermore the Authority has been strongly involved in the telling of the story of the Workshops. A social history unit affiliated with Curtin University has been housed on site for a number of years and the first work on the site, after the restoration of the Mechanic's Institute for the Authority's office use, was the adaptive reuse of the Timekeeper's Office as an Interpretive Centre, which has been opened to the public since 2005. These initiatives are important strategies in telling the story of our industrial heritage.

In 2008, the revitalization of the Workshops was well on its way with a strong focus on its heritage significance and distinctive character. While funding for renewed infrastructure to support the revitalisation has been suspended following the change of government in late 2008, the robust conservation and planning mechanisms that are now in place mean that the future of the Workshops appears to be a positive one.



Fig. 3: Midland Railway Workshops external view c.1905 (Courtesy Rail Heritage WA Photographic Collection No. 2871\_007800)



Fig. 4: Midland Railway Workshops internal view c.1905. (Courtesy Rail Heritage WA Photographic Collection No. 2871\_0078003)