

# Social Value and the Management of Physical Fabric

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## **Social value and the management of physical fabric**

Recognition and assessment of social value as associated with heritage places is an integral part of heritage practice but the connection between social values and physical fabric is often poorly defined.

There are challenges in the meaningful integration of social value assessment into policies that inform decision making about heritage places, and as related to the management of physical fabric.

These derive from:

- the complex, varied and sometimes intensely personal nature of the associations and values identified and the manner in which they are expressed and defined
- the inherent difficulty in sustaining particular associations, memories and meanings (and connections with place) in the context of changes of ownership, adaptive reuse and/or development and
- situations where the identified social value may be reliant on ongoing use or maintained engagement with the place.

These and other issues are explored in the following case studies of institutions where redevelopment has occurred or is proposed.

### **Ballarat Orphanage**

The Ballarat Orphanage was established in the 1860s and operated on the same site until the mid-to late-1980s (latterly as the Ballarat Children's Home). The site was sold in 1987 and the buildings were adapted for use as a school (St Paul's Technical College and Damascus

College) until the end of 2010 around which time it was sold again, this time to a group of local developers.

Located on the east side of the Ballarat city centre and on the main road into the city, the site has been viewed as having significant potential for urban renewal. As contemplated by the new zoning applied with the local Council's support, it is a site that can accommodate residential development with some mixed use and commercial activity.

The site currently supports a complex of mainly institutional buildings dating from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-1980s. The earliest is a brick boundary wall dating from the 1880s and the site also retains two interwar buildings, the Schoolhouse (1919) and the Toddlers' Block (1929/39). Other than for these, the majority of buildings and structures on the site date from 1950-1970, when the original 1860s orphanage building was demolished and the site was substantially redeveloped. Buildings constructed in this period were designed on the more domestically-scaled 'cottage' model favoured for residential care at the time, although these buildings still have an institutional (educational) character. Large areas of the site are open space; these had previously been used as farming land by the orphanage and were later developed as sports grounds.



**Figure 1** H R Caselli's design for the Ballarat District Orphan Asylum, 1866 (State Library of Victoria)



**Figure 2** Undated photograph of children in the playground with the Toddlers' Block of 1929/1939 behind (Child and Family Services, Ballarat)



Figure 3 View of the 1919 Schoolhouse from Victoria Street (Lovell Chen, 2011)



Figure 4 The Albert Leach Cottage wing constructed 1964 (Lovell Chen, 2011)



**Figure 5** View across the centre of the site, former farming land/playing fields (Lovell Chen, 2014)



**Figure 6** Undated view of dairy cows being led along the same road within the site (Courtesy Child and Family Services Ballarat)



**Figure 7** Boundary wall on Stawell Street (Lovell Chen, 2014)

### **Assessment of significance**

At the time of its sale the site was included in a local heritage overlay precinct under the Ballarat Planning Scheme and a conservation management plan (CMP) was commissioned by the new owners to inform future planning for the site (Lovell Chen, 2011). This occurred in the context of a proposed planning scheme amendment to facilitate a change of use and development.

In a city which is distinguished by its history and heritage, this was a site which was not widely recognised in the community as a heritage place. However it was evident from the outset that the Orphanage was of historical significance in the local Ballarat context. Unlike other examples elsewhere in Victoria, it is not an intact nineteenth century orphanage complex, nor is it of particular architectural or aesthetic significance. Historically, however, the story of the Orphanage is important to Ballarat and warranted recognition. It was also

thought likely that the Orphanage would have contemporary social value, particularly to former residents. On this basis the methodology for the CMP included both a detailed historical analysis and investigation of potential social value.

The *historical* significance of the place was readily identified. The place is important as the site of the Ballarat Orphanage established in the 1860s and operational until the mid-1980s. The Orphanage was a major child welfare institution in Ballarat in the nineteenth century, and one of the largest and most prominent of such institutions in the local area. Over its 120-year operational life, the Orphanage accommodated in the order of 4,000 children, both from Ballarat and further afield, including significant numbers of Indigenous children from across the state who were separated from family and community and brought to the orphanage and to the Alexandra Babies' Home, also in Ballarat. Despite the substantial loss of the original nineteenth century building complex and the limited fabric surviving from the pre-WWII period, the place retains historical links with the longer history of the organisation, the numerous individuals associated with its administration and with the children who were resident here. The history of the place is also documented through historical records, and future research will uncover more detail about this history.

Assessment of the *social* value of the place occurred through a combination of documentary research and limited consultation with former residents and others to develop an understanding of the nature and level of attachment to the place.

Direct consultation took place through a workshop facilitated by the City of Ballarat and with the assistance of Child and Family Services Ballarat (CAFS, formerly the Ballarat Orphanage and Ballarat Children's Home). The workshop and written responses provided revealed deeply held but also quite varied views about the place, reflecting the individual's experience.

Historian and heritage consultant Jane Lennon references the concept of ‘negative social value’ and ‘positive social value’ in her work on the Broad Arrow Cafe at Port Arthur in Tasmania, the site of the 1996 massacre (Lennon 2002:39-40). For Lennon, negative social value was expressed as the desire to have that place obliterated and positive social value is where a place is highly valued by a community for its cultural and social associations or exhibits characteristics valued by a community. Both were evident in the case of the orphanage, sometimes in a single response. The place was the subject of intense feelings, and both positive and negative (see news story ABC Ballarat 2012). This was a childhood home but for many it was also a place of displacement and trauma.

A key focus of the workshop was also to understand whether people felt strongly about particular locations or buildings on the site. Inevitably participants also expressed views about the future of the site. The responses to these issues were interesting. While there was some commonality on particular elements (including significant buildings, trees, areas within the site and memorials), this was relatively limited and there was no overall consensus in the views expressed. Some respondents did not support retention of any buildings on the site while others advocated the retention of the entire complex. Most were somewhere between the two, identifying particular elements that they were particularly attached to or evoked specific memories. Some made suggestions of how best to recognise the history of the site (these included a memorial, museum, landscaped area on site, retention of particular buildings and/or trees, naming of streets in any future development after former residents, site interpretation and others).

Other sources were also consulted for the CMP. One was a 2010 film by Indigenous film maker Richard Frankland, *Among Us: A Story of the Stolen Generations of Victoria*

(Frankland 2010). This tells the story of a return visit in 2009 by a group of Aboriginal elders, members of the Stolen Generations, to both the Ballarat Orphanage and the Alexandra Babies' Home sites. The film demonstrates the capacity of such places to prompt reflection and memory; with Frankland using the visit to allow the participants to reflect on their own experiences and memories of the places and the system itself. Those people who were interviewed in *Among Us* clearly had strong memories of the buildings at Ballarat Orphanage, though less so of the Babies' Home. The participants spoke movingly and at length about the effects and impacts on their lives of the separation from family and community and the system of institutionalised care. At least one participant expressed the view that, overall, returning to the sites had been a positive experience, particularly in the company of others. The work confirmed that the orphanage was a focus of intense feelings and/or ongoing attachment for a definable community (consistent with the Burra Charter definition of social value). Recognising this commonality, it was also evident that the specific nature of the attachment and the response to the place was very personal and varied.

The CMP found the place to be of significance:

- for its role as a major child welfare institution in Ballarat for over 120 years, from 1865 to the mid-1980s and for its association with the longer history of the organisation, the individuals associated with its administration, and the children who were resident here (historical significance)
- for its value to individuals associated with the place including former residents (social significance)
- for the research potential associated with the site, including documentary materials and the opportunity for oral history (research potential).

Particular buildings at the site were also identified as having representative, aesthetic and historical significance in their own right in the local context and as contributing to the heritage precinct in which they were located.

### **Conservation policy**

Considerable thought went into the development of policies to respond to the values identified. But this was a site where the policy response was not straightforward, particularly in terms of the extent to which historical and social values could be seen as embodied in the physical fabric of the place. In other words, while the values could be identified, these did not derive solely or specifically from the physical fabric as it existed at the site. For former residents what was keenly felt was the experience of the place and the prominence of it in their lives. On this basis, while some former residents focused on particular buildings, in the CMP assessment, the social associations and values were considered to attach to the place as a whole. Conversely, it seemed clear that this was not a site, which warranted complete or even majority retention on heritage grounds.

Ultimately, the CMP made recommendations for the retention and conservation of a number of the more intact buildings, structures and landscape elements. Recognising historical significance, recommendations were also made for a site interpretation strategy. This was considered critical in light of the loss of the main orphanage building and other early buildings that might otherwise have reflected on the historical values of the place, its layout and use.

In responding to the social values, the CMP recommended the future management of the site include a provision for public access and the establishment of a dedicated place of reflection and sanctuary on the site. This might also be a place where the history of the place could be

marked and interpreted, and could include a dedicated memorial – this had been one of the recommendations of the 2004 Senate Committee *Forgotten Australians report* (Commonwealth of Australia 2004). The salvage of plaques, foundation stones and any other elements (building fabric and fittings) as identified by interested members of the community was also recommended.

In taking this approach a judgement was made that the response of retention of certain key buildings and features in combination with site management and interpretation was an appropriate and sensitive means of recognising the social and historical values of the place. This judgement was made, even recognising that no single approach would necessarily be able to address and respond to all views on the place.

### **The Outcome**

The proposed redevelopment of the orphanage site proved to be controversial and subsequently various contested statutory processes unfolded. These included consideration of an unsuccessful nomination of the orphanage to the Victorian Heritage Register, a planning scheme amendment to rezone the land and modify the heritage overlay and an application to demolish some of the buildings on the site.

In the course of these processes, the importance of the physical fabric of the place was repeatedly expressed by former residents and others associated with the site. As one submitter put it:

Former residents of the orphanage feel a strong drive to be able to confirm their formative experiences through being able to see the bricks and mortar that defined their childhood, and to show something tangible to their children and grandchildren.

While some continued to call for retention of the full complex, for others, attention became focussed on particular buildings. The former Schoolhouse (1919) became a particular focus with a variety of reasons given for the attachment to this building, including:

- the vast majority of children attended school in the building, whereas other buildings were experienced by smaller numbers
- the school was a haven away from the residential buildings
- the school building was seen as a refuge.

Others noted the importance of the boundary wall, referenced by some as the ‘crying wall’, the memorial garden area, the Toddler’s Block, the Sloyd Building (where boys studied woodwork) and the Gymnasium and Picture Theatre. Relatively few focussed strongly on the residential buildings, some reflecting that these did not hold happy memories.

The outcome of the rezoning process was that some of the buildings were identified for retention (including those identified in the CMP as well as the Schoolhouse) with the balance of the site contemplated for redevelopment. There are still plans to implement the recommendations of the CMP in relation to site interpretation and the establishment of a memorial garden or similar.

### **The issues**

This case highlights the difficulties of managing significant physical and use change where a place has had a significant presence in the lives of those who have been associated with it and where some continue to hold strong views about its future. The case also highlights the tensions and challenges that can arise where statutory heritage controls are focussed on the management of the physical fabric of the place and do not directly control future use or access. These issues are to a degree compounded by the fact of private as opposed to public

ownership, where in some cases at least there may be a tradition and expectation of community use and more ability to support the continuation of that in some form (Walker 1998). While well known locally (whether as the Children's Home or Damascus College), this is not a site which has not ever been publicly owned and managed, nor is it a site where its heritage values are necessarily readily appreciated and embraced by the wider Ballarat community.

There are many other former residential institutions where the process of adaptation, change and redevelopment has occurred within heritage management frameworks and with statutory controls in place. However this does not necessarily lead to a meaningful engagement with the past. Historians Keir Reeves and David Nichols (Reeves and Nichols 2009: 250) are right to point to the failure in some of these projects to fully engage with the complex and often challenging nature of their histories. In their detailed analysis of the early 1990s conversion of the Kew Lunatic Asylum (Willsmere) to an exclusive (gated) 'heritage' residential development they note that new uses can mitigate against an in-depth understanding of history, denying rather than countenancing (much less celebrating) the site's past. At Willsmere large parts of the complex were retained and the original complex and its layout remain legible despite the apartment and townhouse development. There is also some on-site interpretation. Yet the very nature of its use is at odds with the past, as this comment from *The Age* in 1998 suggests:

Locked in a former lunatic asylum doesn't sound like fun, but for busy parents and children it is a world apart at Willsmere.

Life is relaxed, happy and secure. It is almost a paradise for families.

There are sprawling lawns - but you do not have to mow them; there are groves of trees but you do not have to prune them; there are flower beds but you do not have to plant

them. You do not have to renovate, cars are diverted from play areas and the swimming pool has no deep end.

You cannot just wander into Willsmere. The estate is surrounded by security fencing and there is an intercom at the main gate. If someone on the inside does not vouch for you - you don't get in.

Ironically, as it was always, Willsmere remains 'a world apart'.

This problem persists and many such places continue to be 're-presented' in a way that is not particularly evocative of 'difficult' pasts. Recognition of the contemporary social value of these former institutions has been even more conspicuous by its absence. Relatively rarely has there been any serious consideration of social value, whether in the assessment of significance or in developing policies for adaptation and development. In some cases it may be simply that the passage of time has already lessened the sense of direct attachment or connection to these places (and the 'social values' are therefore characterised as really being historical), but for others more likely it is a case of nobody asking. But the Ballarat example suggests this may be changing. It is perhaps relevant to note that the proposed redevelopment of the Orphanage site has unfolded against a backdrop of heightened awareness and increasingly widespread public concern over the legacy of institutional residential care for children. This includes the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the earlier *Forgotten Australians* report (Commonwealth of Australia 2004).

Kew Cottages is another example of a large-scale residential care institution where a major redevelopment has occurred, one that was also controversial and contested. There, the physical outcome is the retention of only a small number of heritage buildings, the Cottage, Old School House and former Dining Hall. These stand isolated in a broader development and

unfortunately with no adaptive reuse identified to date. The extent of change at the Kew Cottages site is so wholesale that it is difficult now to get a sense of the history of the place from the remaining fabric.

Accepting this, efforts are being made to interpret its history and the social dimension of this history including the personal connections of former residents to the place (HLCD 2008, Lovell Chen 2013). The site retains memorials and an artwork from the 1990s: the Fire Memorial Column (to the memory of nine residents who died in a fire on 8 April 1996), the Long Term Residents Memorial (installed in 1991 by the Kew Cottages and St Nicholas Parents' Association) and the Residents' Sculpture Sentinel (created by residents in 1991).



**Figure 8** Retained heritage buildings at Kew Cottages (Lovell Chen 2013)



**Figure 9** Residents' Sculpture 'Sentinel' (Victorian Heritage Database)

The implementation of a major interpretation strategy for the site is also underway; this includes on-site interpretation focussing on different aspects of the history of this site. This is to be located at and near the retained heritage buildings and memorials, in a part of the site that is publicly accessible and can be visited.

Importantly, the on-site interpretation is supplemented by reference to the Kew Cottages History Project, an online resource which provides a wealth of resources, including historical photographs, digitised historical documents and residents' stories (films including stills and interviews). The project and website were produced under the auspices of LaTrobe University with support from partner the Department of Human Services and funding from the Australian Research Council.

## **Conclusion**

The Ballarat Orphanage case shows that responding to social value in considering physical and use change can be difficult, given the complex, diverse and personal and dynamic nature of the attachment. In that case, the importance of ‘bricks and mortar’ was a theme for those advocating for its retention, as embodying the significance of the place to them.

Notwithstanding, it remains difficult to conceive of a response to these associations and sense of attachment solely through the retention of physical fabric and particular buildings and/or other elements. Retained buildings and structures have the potential to evoke memories and may be symbolic of experience but as adapted and in a changed context they are likely to present and be understood very differently. Fabric may be retained and conserved in response to identified social values, but then may serve only as a reminder, a trigger for more complex social meanings or personal memory (albeit perhaps this is enough). Like the remaining heritage buildings at the redeveloped Kew Cottages site in Melbourne, they may ultimately stand as a prompt to memory, a surviving part as a reminder of the whole. Regardless of the outcome physically, a more holistic response - including commemoration and interpretation - will still be required.

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