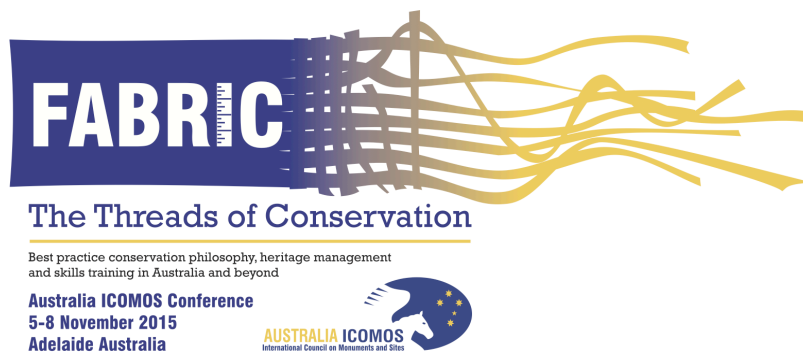


# **The language of contextual design – examining a framework for a design dialogue between change and management of heritage values**

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## Introduction

1975 – Dateline Adelaide. Architect Robert Dickson has just been awarded a Royal Australian Institute of Architects Award of Merit for his new Union House project. Adelaide Regionalism met Georgian Revival architecture and the designer took up the challenge, providing a cluster of contemporary buildings to meet the growing social and recreational needs of students. The design was brash, contemporary and warmly received by client and community.

Fast forward to 2015. Union House still stands and is now an integral part of the cultural heritage fabric of the University. The architectural value of the place was acknowledged when entered on the SA State Heritage Register: “The earlier Georgian buildings designed by Woods, Bagot, Jory and Laybourne-Smith reflect the influence that firm had on the built character of the university campus. These subsequently provided the parameters for the structure and design of Union House, noted for the quality of its internal spaces and its relationship to the earlier buildings.”

([http://apps.planning.sa.gov.au/HeritageSearch/HeritageItem.aspx?p\\_shrcode=17619](http://apps.planning.sa.gov.au/HeritageSearch/HeritageItem.aspx?p_shrcode=17619), accessed 21 Sept 2015). Dickson’s contextual design solution was successful and provides a useful example of the successful blend of new and old, contemporary and traditional, with the two becoming re-interpreted through architecture that spoke both of its cultural roots and also of its contemporary condition.

The example illustrates that our community values both heritage and the bold architectural interventions that re-imagine, rather than just show good manners. It is a controversial idea, but one worth exploration, to encourage re-discovery and enrichment of the heritage fabric of our cities through architectural discourse. Is this not an aspiration of most communities – the celebration of society, memory and identity through cultural pursuits such as art, architecture, literature and music? Does the Burra Charter incorporate such an approach, or is its focus on the micro, rather than macro scale of heritage interpretation and conservation? Can we consider adaptation of Charter Principles, or consider a new principle that accommodates design approaches that engage with

heritage fabric in a different manner to the theoretical approach of Article 22? Is the Burra Charter robust enough to manage this nexus? Do planning controls and design guidelines support good heritage and architecture outcomes, or do they constrain the heritage of tomorrow?

*“Places that have been identified as being of heritage significance to the community have values that are inherent. The architect’s role is through the creative process: to reveal those values, to interpret them and to sustain the place into the future – to create new layers, new life, and, in some cases, achieve the addition of a new level of significance to the place.”* (McDonald, in Hill, J (ed) 2004, p35)

These questions are vast in scope and require detailed examination and debate beyond the scope of this paper. As a starting point, five examples of contextual design will be critically explored through the framework of language, to better understand the nexus between heritage value and contemporary architecture and determine the success or failure of such approaches.

### **Contextual design and The Burra Charter**

Burra Charter Articles relevant to contextual design are few in number. Article 8 notes that new construction should not adversely impact on the setting of a heritage place. Article 21 requires ‘minimal change’ to the significant fabric of a place. Article 22 is often misused and is interpreted as instruction to design without reference to context – so new work doesn’t confuse with significant fabric. These Articles focus attention on the conservation of significant fabric – which is generally appropriate. Contemporary contextual design that references heritage value and reinterprets and supports those values is not encouraged in the current Burra Charter framework and requires a broader approach.

The US Secretary of the Interior’s ‘Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties’ “promote compatibility, where new work is ‘differentiated from the old and (to) be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the (historic) property and its environment’” (Ames & Wagner 2009, p14). The Standards reject the

matching approach, arguing that the integrity and significance of an historic property would be undermined if new work were not visually distinguished from the original. Standards also reject the contrasting approach because, “too much distinction between the new and old would also compromise the integrity and significance of the historic property.” (ibid, p14)

Both heritage management approaches are similar and subtle. Innovative contextual design is not encouraged and an almost academic approach is preferred, an approach not necessarily apparent to the common eye.

A different approach to contextual design is possible, but is dependant on the aesthetic skill of the architect and the communication skills between client, designer and regulator. If language is able to provide a common thread, architectural excellence that both reflects the current moment and celebrates heritage value may be able to be achieved in contextual design projects.

Heritage Advisers and Design Guideline documents often use language to describe ideal architectural design objectives in heritage contexts. Words such as ‘fitting in, compatibility, respect and blending’ are often used to describe an ideal design solution that impacts on the heritage fabric of dwellings, public buildings and streetscapes. English Heritage (now Historic England) and CABE ‘Building in Context’ (2002) design guidelines use words such as: ‘fitting in’ or ‘contrasting the new with the old.’

(<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110118095356/http://www.cabe.org.uk/publications/building-in-context> , accessed 21 Sept 2015). The guidelines continue, noting that a successful contextual design project will:

- “relate well to the geography and history of the place and the lie of the land
- sit happily in the pattern of existing development and routes through and around it
- respect important views
- use materials and building methods which are as high in quality as those used in existing buildings

- create new views and juxtapositions which add to the variety and texture of the setting.”  
(ibid).

Design quality is stressed through compliment or contrast and stylistic imitation is not encouraged. The architect is instructed to critically appraise the character of the context and design a high quality contemporary outcome appropriate to the context. Language is used to describe design approaches, but is substantially subjective in intent.

In Australia, key contextual design guideline documents have been prepared by the NSW Heritage Office (Design in Context, 2015) and by Heritage Victoria (New Buildings in an Area Heritage Overlay 2007). Both reference the Burra Charter. The NSW document illustrates contextual design under six design criteria: character; scale; form; siting; materials and colour; and detailing. Heritage Victoria’s Heritage Overlay document is similar. Both documents note that complimentary or contrasting design responses are acceptable design solutions. Despite this, words such as ‘fitting in’, ‘reflect’ ‘not detract from’ and ‘sympathetic’ are used to describe possible design approaches within historic contexts. Contextual architectural innovation would be difficult to defend given the language tone of such documents.

### **The language of contextual architecture – within a heritage context**

The use of language to describe contextual design approaches may assist to understand the proposition of this paper. Contemporary, creative architecture has the potential to not only respect heritage values, but also provide commentary and enhance the interpretation of those values. A suitable contextual design response within a historic context should meld heritage values and architectural intent, maintaining both voices but also providing a solution of combined higher-level worth.

The following contextual design examples are provided to illustrate this point. Examples are described using the language framework formalised by Francoise Bollack, 2013, in *‘Old Buildings, New Forms – New Directions in Architectural Transformations’*.

## INSERTIONS

Insertions reinvigorate, activate, repurpose and enhance heritage fabric. This approach is often dramatic and combines programme, heritage artefact and architectural language in equal mix. The resultant inserted architectural solution redefines the meaning of the place, but without loss of heritage value.

“in general, the inserted piece has its own identity: it creates its own world, and the pleasure of this new world is heightened by the experience of its relationship to the old. The container is the carrier of memories and emotions, and the insertion provides ‘the new’ (new uses, a new sensibility and a new relevance for the existing structure which it re-animates)....” (Bollack, Pg 23)

The Champollion Museum, Figeac, France is a dramatic, but successful insertion. The medieval era building was intact, but was greatly altered over time. The building was also home to a famous French text scholar of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Moatti & Riviere Architects were given the brief to design a Museum of World Script’ within the structure. The solution creatively combines the shell of the medieval era building with architecture that speaks to the purpose of the place – a script museum. The interior of the building was removed, but the external form of the place was maintained, continuing the historic landscape of the town. The inserted museum was recessed from the façade, reducing visual dominance of the new and reinstating the arcaded base in a manner more reflective of medieval times. The historic shell can be explored throughout the museum, as medieval room fragments meet new spaces. The historic building becomes the container for the museum insertion. The architectural solution is bold and equally successful, as it creates a tension between heritage fabric, new architecture and the space between – the space of most interest in heritage interpretation.

Insertions repurpose heritage buildings and can provide a valuable approach to interpreting heritage values.



*Champollion Museum, Figeac, France: Before and After (Bollack, p39-40)*

## PARASITES

Parasites are typically negative, dominant or destructive. “The term ‘parasite’ often has pejorative connotations- one organism, the parasite, benefits at the expense of the other, the host – but the relationship can be can also be symbiotic one where the parasite and the host both benefit. .... The original building provides key functions: structural support, access, ready made integration into an historical cultural fabric, ...the addition provides space and ..... an invitation to re-read a situation for uses that had originally not been anticipated.” (Bollack, pg 65).

The Militarhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr, Dresden, is a late 19<sup>th</sup> Century barracks building complex with a parasite – architect Daniel Libeskind’s 2011 steel wedge. The form is arresting and confronting, slicing the stucco faced, mannerist styled building into two. The parasite is the drawcard, enticing visitors to enter the building to understand the logic of the architecture. The wedge form contains the circulation system and many of the contemporary galleries of the museum. The juxtaposition of new and old is celebrated at the junction of the two forms. One moves between the historic and contemporary interiors, reinterpreting both on a continual basis. The parasite works

in this case, as the host is still the dominant form – the heritage values of the place are still pre-eminent. While the parasitic wedge appears to be disruptive and disrespectful to the setting of facades, the integration of the two parti is much more successful and appropriate after exploration. Significant views of the place are still intact and a majority of the historic interior is still extant. The wedge is a museum artefact, commenting on militarism and providing an ever-changing perspective through the intersection of the two forms.

Parasites can be dominant and can compromise heritage values of places. If the scale of infection is not substantial, parasites provide an opportunity to reinterpret heritage values through the strength of the concept and the degree of interaction with existing heritage fabric and values.



*Militarhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr, Dresden, 2014, photo M Queale*



## WRAPS

Wraps enclose, protect, re-sheath and contain heritage fabric. Museum objects are often wrapped in display cases, or indeed buildings. By its nature, the wrap can dominate the original structure, as it seals the building under a typically larger architectural programme. Heritage facades are often wrapped into larger building podiums in inner city developments. Small heritage buildings may be encapsulated into larger structures, becoming artefacts, isolated from their original historic context and significance. “It is intended to protect the older buildings and to present them anew by incorporating them into a different whole. The purpose is often also to announce a renewal, a new energy geared to the future. The new skin represents modernity wrapped around the familiar, and the new wrap is always distinct.” (Bollack pg113).

Bollack illustrates the concept of a wrap through the example of Enric Miralles & Benedetta Tagliabue Architects Santa Caterina Market, Barcelona Spain (2005). The 1848 market is located in the Old Town section of Barcelona. The classically styled facades were retained and a new folding, tactile roof canopy was folded over the facades and market behind, creating a dynamic, engaging interior of modernity. The 1840s steel framed roof was demolished to make way for the new roof form. The loss of so much significant building fabric was regrettable. The new roof wrap is of similar concept to the original roof though, enclosing a large market space for unencumbered trading.

Wraps appear to dominate the enclosed heritage place – to wrap implies re-covering and redefining the appearance and meaning of the initial object. This may be problematic for heritage fabric – the wrap may dominate and irreversibly impact on extant heritage values. Wraps are only a successful strategy when the object to be wrapped is the dominant entity and the wrap is less a blanket and more a triage bandage perhaps.



*Santa Caterina Market, Bollack, p129*

## JUXTAPOSITIONS

A contrast between new and old is often considered an appropriate contextual approach when designing adjacent heritage fabric. Imitation of heritage elements would compromise the integrity of the original heritage fabric and would re-write history. Article 22 of the Burra Charter is clearly in support of this contrasting approach, but the article focuses on the macro, not urban scale in intent. Bollack defines a juxtaposition thus: “the addition stands next to the original building and does not engage in an obvious dialogue with the older structure. The original remains fully legible, there is no blurring of boundaries, no transfer of architectural elements, no architectural ‘call and response’. The new piece ....contributes through a kind of aloofness, a distance. The visual separation is established by a combination of distinct styles, different materials palates contrasting colours and textures, or volumetric abstraction. This formal separation of two worlds adds to the value of each.” (Bollack pg141).

Sydney’s 1850s Mint development by FJMT in 2005 provides an insightful illustration of a successful juxtaposition of heritage fabric and contemporary design. The Mint stood as a collection

of government buildings of various dates in Macquarie St, adjacent Hyde Park Barracks. The section to the rear of the site contained buildings from the 1850s period, bordering a central courtyard. The project solution proposed the erection of a new building, to suit functional requirements and to re-establish the courtyard space. The new building is the architectural opposite of the sandstone, Georgian styled buildings extant on the site. Despite this, the juxtaposition of new and old is in balance, providing a setting for the heritage fabric, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century building form and enclosing a courtyard space of civic importance. New has a unique identity, but does not dominate the old due to the skill of the designer in incorporating the established scale, setting and proportion of heritage fabric, the inclusion of a recessed 'hinge' between buildings and the design neutrality of the new façade. This is contemporary architecture of 'good manners'.



*Griffin, p48*

## **WEAVINGS**

New architecture woven into architecture of heritage significance can result in a subtle mix of styles and meanings, one the warp the other the weft – both combining to create new fabric of enriched meaning.

“Generally the limits, or the seams, between the old and the new work are not immediately apparent or they do not form a recognisable pattern. The architect proceeds by editing the existing elements

of the older structure, leaving some intact, foregrounding some features, and underplaying or eliminating others while working the new elements over and into the existing fabric. ... the result is akin to a knitted fabric.” (Bollack pg179).

Such an approach can fail if the balance between new architecture and heritage fabric is not achieved. Further, the new architecture should be informed by the values of the heritage fabric, so that rather than competing, it is grafted to this fabric, enriching and interpreting established heritage values.

The 1975 Dickson and Platten designed University of Adelaide Union House, illustrates the design balance required. The new architecture replaced parts of the Georgian styled campus of buildings. The building was located between two existing university buildings and enclosed a cloistered courtyard space of heritage value to the university. The Dixon building is clearly contemporary in design, featuring natural materials, a concrete frame and large scale spaces. Union House was successful woven into the University of Adelaide Campus because the architects read and understood the elements of significance of the place – cloister, red brick, render banding, fenestration, red tile roofs, scale and the plan proportions of existing buildings. Their resultant architecture did not mimic these elements, but incorporated them into the new work.

The clever repetition of the established Georgian Revival style era structural grid resulted in a contemporary place of 19<sup>th</sup> Century proportions and spatial type. This is how the two places knit together. The new is dominant, but the heritage fabric is also predominant – the 19<sup>th</sup> Century cloister is intact and continues to remind of historic ecclesiastical precedents.



*Union House, University of Adelaide, 2015, Photo M Queale*

## **Outcomes**

Does a language based approach to contextual design provide a useful direction for heritage management and architectural innovation? Language allows clarity in design discourse and allows comparison of potential design responses. A language approach allows better annunciation of appropriate contextual design approaches within the framework of the Burra Charter.

Article 22 proposes that ‘replication’ is not supported. Further Articles should be considered to manage the issue of contextual design – for an interior, an addition or a new building associated with heritage places. Further Articles should consider how context and design should be best approached in historic contexts. Historic England’s Guidelines are a good starting point. These Guidelines promote appropriate, but also high quality design outcomes, without description of chimney shapes, or decoration or stylistic features common to many guidelines documents.

Ultimately, the training and skill of the architect is paramount. A good designer will read the context, plan the functional needs and produce architecture of note that combines contemporary design with the heritage values inherent in the place. The result should speak to the past and the future, maintaining the integrity of both while also adding to the heritage story of the place.

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**Other**

Heritage Victoria ‘The Heritage Overlay Guidelines’ – 5 New Buildings in an Area Heritage Overlay

NSW Heritage Office Design in Context – Guidelines for Infill Development in the Historic Environment