



**Northbridge History Day
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Northbridge Heritage – Friend or Foe?

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Everyone has a personal inheritance. For some people, there may be family heirlooms which have symbolic and associative values. For others it is documents, gravestones and date stones on buildings that help them to trace their ancestral routes. For most of us, heritage provides landmarks we can identify with, that give us a sense of belonging and a sense of place in time and space. If a tree we knew as a child is cut down, or a building in our neighbourhood is demolished, we feel a loss as if part of ourselves has gone. It is only when something is threatened that we realise how much we value it.¹

Introduction

This paper suggests that heritage impinges on the lives of everyone and that there is an urgent need to encourage as wide an audience as possible to learn about the history that surrounds them in places such as Northbridge and become actively involved caring for the places that make the district distinct from other areas of Perth. Without such involvement Northbridge is in danger of losing much physical evidence of the rich tapestry of cultures, history and landscapes that make up the area once known as 'North of the Line' or 'Little Italy'.

Today, heritage places are frequently depicted as an impediment to economic prosperity and an infringement of people's 'right' to build what they like, where they want.² Thanks to a vociferous minority, 'heritage' has been portrayed as a boring, irrelevant millstone around the neck of a forward-thinking and fast-moving society. The following extract from a recent report of the Environmental Protection Authority shows that, whilst concern for the protection of heritage properties is nationally very high, a large proportion of proposed heritage listings are objected to by property owners under the misconception that such listings will be detrimental to property values and severely restrict development potential.

"Objections to proposed historic heritage listings are typically the result of development pressures and views about property rights from some sectors of the community. In principle, community support for historic heritage conservation is high, with a recent nationwide survey showing that 94% of Western Australian respondents believe it is important to protect heritage places even though they may not visit them and 91% believe it is important to keep historic heritage features wherever possible when improving towns and cities (Allen Consulting Group, 2005). In practice, there is less support for heritage listing of properties when they directly involve property owners: nearly 30% of proposed registrations for historic heritage listings on the State register are objected to by property owners. Contributing to this is the misconception that heritage protection is detrimental to property values and limits development potential. Community support for heritage is often influenced by the level and tone of media coverage of heritage issues. Historic heritage has been marked by considerable adverse publicity over the past few years, usually based on a property rights platform."³

Thankfully, the importance communities attach to 'heritage' is growing every year. Events such as the Northbridge History Day are important in enabling people to access their heritage and appreciate it as an important part of their lives. By improving the public's knowledge of the community importance of heritage we can begin to strongly counter the arguments of the 'heritage is irrelevant' faction and ensure better protection for our important historic places in Northbridge and further afield. But what is heritage and why is it relevant to Northbridge today?

Heritage: A Definition

Ask a member of the public for a definition of heritage and images immediately flash through their minds of romantic mediaeval castles and churches in Europe, or historic Perth buildings such as the Barracks Arch or His Majesty's Theatre. These images, along with family memorabilia such as photographs, personal letters and documents, combine to give a personal heritage which is cherished, appreciated and often shared with others. Such heritage helps us all to appreciate who we are and where we've come from.



Communities too have a collective heritage, which can include buildings, parks, landscapes, archives and collections of objects gathered by citizens. These all combine to give a unique cultural identity to the people who live in that particular area.

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) defines heritage as 'the product and witness of the different traditions and of the spiritual achievements of the past and . . . thus an essential element in the personality of peoples'.⁴ However, a simpler definition of heritage is:

*Those things from the past, which are valued enough today
to save for future generations.⁵*

This definition, which has been adopted by many heritage organisations around the world, is deliberately broad and enables the inclusion of intangible heritage such as language and customs, as well as the tangible heritage of places and moveable collections. But can the definition be applied to relatively new cities such as Perth? The answer is that the past is all around us; everywhere has a history and everywhere has a heritage. Therefore, even in cities as new as Perth, we live our lives against a rich backdrop formed by buildings and landscapes created by previous generations, plus other tangible and intangible evidence of our past.

Particularly in modern cities this answer raises a further question: when is something old enough to become part of our heritage?



Since the notion of heritage is derived from a wide variety of values and constantly evolving, there can be no age qualification that defines a heritage place, nor is there a measure of the value it gives to individuals or communities. In Perth, the silhouette of comparatively new buildings such as the BankWest Tower and Central Park clearly define the city's skyline. These, along with modern architectural icons such as the Bell Tower, have already become part of Perth's contemporary heritage, helping to make the city different from any other city in the world.

A Sense of Place

The historic environment is more than just mere material remains; it is central to how we see our identity and ourselves as individuals, communities and as a nation. In a transient and rapidly changing world, interest in who we are and where we've come from is increasingly important. Our heritage is therefore an inheritance that helps define our future by inspiring new ideas, providing lessons from past which help to formulate solutions to the problems we face today.

Historic landscapes and buildings greatly enrich the character of the places where we live and work, helping us to differentiate one place from another. They can also become a focus of community identity and pride, helping to define a neighbourhood and creating a sense of local cohesion. The distinctive geographical features of an area, combined with other sensory perceptions, are often described as the 'sense of place' for any location. The term 'sense of place' is used to refer to the feelings people have for particular locations and the meaning they gain from a relationship with them. Along with the sense of self and sense of community, sense of place is one of the fundamental 'felt' senses a person develops in their early years.

The characteristics of sense of place can be categorised as:

- Physical features that make a place special or unique
- Features that create an abiding connection to a place
- The spirituality of a place

These characteristics all combine to form the strong associations we make to familiar places. Sense of place forms the basis of all our attachments, including the extremely important feeling of 'belonging'. Almost everyone recognises that, just as they have a native language, there is a place that has impressed its unique character into their psyche to the extent that it is considered as 'home'.

The heritage elements of a place help to give it a distinctive character which makes it possible to recognise it as 'somewhere in particular'. The strong attachments people form with the locations they know well are reinforced by the historic environment which gives greater depth to these cherished places, often providing evocative memories of particular events or people associated with them. A war memorial, an old church, school or house can evoke memories that create strong connections with the past, linking people with their forebears and engendering a strong affinity with a place.



Northbridge – A Rich Slice of Perth History

It is said that history is a gradual accumulation of change and decay, movement and arrivals, new stories attaching themselves to old, all adding to the repository of information, knowledge and understanding we have of why people and places are as they are. Nowhere in Perth is this more apparent than in the area which we now call Northbridge: there is probably a more tangible feeling of sense of place here than almost anywhere else in the city.

The history of Northbridge has been formed and defined by more world cultures than any place in Western Australia: a rich, ethnic diversity that has helped to shape its character and development. The area was originally a series of interconnected swamps and lakes that were drained during the 1860s. Originally the site of market gardens tended by the Chinese community, Northbridge became a flourishing trade and light-manufacturing centre for Perth during the first gold rush of the 1890s. In more recent times it has gained both popularity and notoriety as the 'entertainment' precinct of the city, which at one stage claimed 'more restaurants per capita than anywhere else in the southern hemisphere'.

Despite countless past redevelopment schemes, Northbridge probably retains more historic buildings than any other area of central Perth. These building survivals highlight the history of the various communities that inhabit the area and are a key element to the precinct's very strong sense of place as exemplified by the following examples:

The Chung Wah Hall, was built in 1911 as a 'suitable place of resort for Gentlemen of the Chinese nationality residing in Western Australia ...' This very fine hall with its splendid decorative pressed tin ceiling was, and remains, a centre for the Chinese community in Perth reminding us of its long association with Northbridge.

The Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helene was built in 1936-37 during a period of considerable building activity in the economic recovery that followed the Great Depression. Designed by architectural firm, Oldham, Boas and Ednie-Brown, this important landmark on the edge of Russell Square has been the major place of worship and fellowship for Perth's Greek community since its construction.

Originally built as the Great Western Hotel, the *Brass Monkey* was one of the most lavish hotels constructed in Perth during the first Gold Boom. A photograph taken soon after its completion in 1896 shows fine cast iron filigree work on the balconies, verandas and quality brickwork that all combine to give a building of quality and distinction.



In addition to these larger community and commercial buildings, much fine domestic architecture has survived in Northbridge. The elegant lines of *Tower House*, for example, a substantial, purpose-built, Victorian Italianate style boarding house, which operated as such from 1898 to the 1930s, beautifully compliments the Greek Orthodox Cathedral on the other side of the road. On an even humbler scale, Northbridge streets such as Lake Street still retain a wide variety of stylish houses built from the 1890s onwards, all combining to create streetscapes of great charm and character.

These buildings and countless others add quality, variety and meaning to the lives of those who live in Northbridge or visit it. History, art and human endeavour are set out for all to see on our streets, reminding people as they go about their daily lives of their cultural inheritance.

You'll Only Miss it When it's Gone

Research suggests that there is overwhelming public support for the historic environment. It is encouraging that the report, *Valuing the Priceless: the Value of Historic Heritage in Australia*⁶ suggests that 93% of Australians see heritage as forming a vital part of the country's identity. In addition, 62% of the people interviewed across Australia believe that too little is being done to support heritage conservation.

Community awareness of both the social and economic value of heritage precincts in our towns and cities has risen substantially over the last 20 years and there are now many examples where physical improvements to these areas have led to dramatic turnarounds in the economic fortunes of formerly depressed environments. Yet political interest, as manifested in supportive public policy and fiscal investment in heritage, sadly, does not appear to reflect this public enthusiasm.

Why Conserve?

The physical survivals of the past form a central part of our cultural heritage, and should be valued and protected for their own sake. They provide an irreplaceable record which helps to inform our understanding of both the past and the present. Historic buildings and conservation areas are vitally important to our national identity and to the environmental quality of everyday life. Caring for our historic environment is in the long-term interests of society.⁷

Clearly most people consider our heritage to be a 'friend' rather than a 'foe', with only a handful of people, most of whom stand to make huge amounts of money from the redevelopment of heritage sites, advocating non-protective policies. Whilst development is essential for the economic prosperity and growth of our city, it is vital that future plans respect that which has gone before and embrace the key elements from the past that contribute to that all important 'sense of place' of an area.



The historic environment greatly enriches the quality of our lives, contributing to local character and the sense of place. Attractive places inspire public support and build a sense of value and shared responsibility, helping to inspire creativity, cultural regeneration and civic pride. Heritage can operate as catalyst for development, attracts tourists and helps to position cities within the urban hierarchy, nationally and internationally. To effectively use the heritage of Northbridge to be such a driver, it is necessary to understand the qualities that contribute to its distinctiveness

and encourage partnerships which promote the qualities and benefits that heritage adds to the area. In so doing we will ensure Perth's position as a world-class city.

A report by English Heritage suggests:

“Characterless, anonymous places produce rootless, unattached people. It is no surprise that people feel abandoned by society if they are forced to live in places engineered by those with no personal stake in the future of the environment they are creating.”⁸



Where heritage is included as an integral part of a planning scheme, it creates real social and economic benefits by offering characterful, desirable places to live. Where heritage it is neglected, ignored, degraded or destroyed, poverty, crime and economic failure invariably follow.

‘You’ll only miss it when it’s gone’, is a truism that we disregard at our peril. Over the past few decades, just like many other cities in the world, a great number of

Perth’s fine old buildings have been subjected to the wrecker’s ball. In maintaining that all important ‘sense of place’ for our city, Perth would do well to heed the words of a founder of the UK National Trust, Miss Octavia Hill (1838 – 1912):

“Hold on to that which is good, for your children and your children’s children.”

Considering the international recruitment drive being carried out to service Perth’s current boom economy, it is vital to provide people with attractive, pleasant places to live in order to entice them to the world’s most remote city. This can only be done by recognising that the city’s heritage plays an integral part in creating that all important characterful ‘sense of place’ people desire. People shape places and places shape people. If we are to avoid the danger of creating sterile, lifeless communal spaces, we must treat the city’s heritage as a ‘friend’ rather than a ‘foe’ and persuade government at all levels of the important contribution heritage makes to the quality of our lives.

¹ *A Future for Our Past* (Mark Brisbane & John Wood, 1996)

² *Conservation of Australia’s Historic Heritage Places* (Productivity Commission, April 2006)

³ *State of the Environment Report* (The Environmental Protection Authority Western Australia, 2007)

⁴ *The Meanings of Heritage* (Allen and Unwin, 1991)

⁵ *Heritage Perth web site* (www.heritageperth.com.au)

⁶ *Valuing the Priceless* (The Allen Consulting Group, Sydney, 2005)

⁷ *Development in the Historic Environment* (English Heritage, 1995)

⁸ *People and Places* (English Heritage, 2004)