‘Why not call ourselves Mutilated Melbourne?’
A history of urban heritage
at the Rialto Towers

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Abstract

When completed in 1986, the Rialto Towers were the tallest building complex in the Southern Hemisphere. They remain today an enduring mark on the Melbourne city skyline, grounded at the prominent intersection of Collins and King Streets. Their construction was, however, preceded by a decade-long dispute over the nineteenth-century buildings located at the site, dubbed the Rialto precinct, which heritage activists sought to preserve. Tensions over the site’s heritage again flared in 2015 after the Rialto’s developer proposed a new building attached to the skyscraper, within the former envelope of Robb’s building, which had been demolished in order to open sightlines to the skyscraper. This article returns to the 1970s and early 1980s to examine the contest over the Rialto precinct from the perspectives of heritage activists, government authorities and commercial developers. By mapping the Rialto precinct from these various perspectives, I argue that heritage at the site was contested because of conflicting understandings of the meanings of and therefore the possibilities for heritage. This led to a mixed heritage outcome amidst a nascent urban heritage system and broader political, economic and socio-cultural shifts. I further argue that the present day urban heritage system lacks a consciousness of its own history, as recent events have shown, which continues to produce less desirable urban heritage outcomes for the Australian city.

Figure 1: The Rialto precinct, Collins Street, ca. 1984. Courtesy of Chris McConville and the Melbourne Historical Journal.
Introduction

In July 2015, Melbourne’s *Age* reported that the Grollo Group had proposed a five-storey glass and steel office block attached to the Rialto Towers at the corner of Collins and King Streets (Lucas 2015a). This new building, dubbed a ‘wraparound’ by journalist Clay Lucas, would be effectively contained within the former envelope of a building that had been demolished for the skyscraper in the early 1980s. Robbs’ Building was indeed lost for the construction of the skyscraper, whilst the original Rialto and the Winfield buildings were restored and the façade of the Olderfleet retained. To the dismay of today’s heritage activists, in October 2015, the Grollo Group proceeded to demolish a last vestige of Robbs’, its annex, which had no state or local heritage protection, only a National Trust classification (Lucas 2015b). This latest incident in the long-running heritage dispute at the Rialto precinct revealed the need for innovative histories of heritage for the heritage system. After all, this was the same precinct that in 1978, under threat of demolition, had led Barry Humphries to ask: ‘Why not call ourselves Mutilated Melbourne?’ (1978). This article examines the heritage conflict over the Rialto that began in the 1970s and once again erupted in 2015.

The conflict over the Rialto precinct was a decisive moment for urban heritage in Melbourne. The Rialto Towers were approved in late 1981 and constructed between 1982 and 1986 at the western end of Collins Street (Figure 3), the city’s premier thoroughfare, where many historically significant buildings had been demolished over the previous two decades (Davison 1991)—as in many other Australian and Western cities.
From the late 1960s, National Mutual Life Association of Australia had acquired properties along Collins and King Streets to redevelop what became known as the Rialto precinct. At that time, Victoria, and the rest of Australia, lacked heritage legislation. In 1974, the Victorian State Government established the Historic Buildings Preservation Council (HBPC), partly in response to the demolitions on Collins Street, making Victoria the first Australian state to have explicit urban heritage legislation. The HBPC was an independent heritage panel that listed places on and assessed planning proposals for a new Register of Historic Buildings. With heritage preservation now enshrined in law, a number of proposals for the Rialto precinct emerged from the mid-1970s with varying degrees of heritage sensitivity. By then, not only heritage activists but also many sections of the community expected that urban redevelopment would be sensitive towards heritage (Davison 1987, 1991). None of the 1970s proposals were realised due to government inaction in the face of heritage activism.

In late 1980, the Grollo Group and its business partners acquired a financial option over the Rialto precinct. Founded by Italian migrants in the 1920s, the Grollo Group has always courted controversy because of its willingness to challenge established Melbourne urban sensibilities (Dovey 2004: 183; Jacobs 2001: 24-25). Twelve months later, days out from the expiry of its financial option, the State Government granted the Grollo Group approval for a skyscraper, resulting in a mixed heritage outcome. The emergent heritage system, incorporating new heritage legislation, management practices and activist techniques, proved unable to safeguard many of the buildings at the Rialto precinct, nor to prevent their overshadowing by a skyscraper. This situation might seem familiar across Melbourne (and other Australian CBDs) today, but the heritage system at this time was still largely untested, particularly by largescale skyscraper developments.

The Rialto precinct was comprised of various late nineteenth-century buildings including the neoclassical Robb’s Building, bluestone York Butter Factory, the Queen Anne style Winfield Building, the William Pitt designed neo-Gothic Rialto building (which lent its name to the whole precinct), and the eclectic Olderfleet building (HBPC 1981). According to Robert Hoddle’s 1837 Melbourne grid, the Rialto precinct was located in Block 2 and the original Scots’ Church was established on this block in November 1838 (Freeman 1990). In the early 1870s, the church moved eastward down Collins Street, making way for the subsequent buildings, which were mostly constructed during the ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ economic boom of the 1880s. For instance, the Rialto building was designed for the astute businessman Patrick McCaughan. Architect Pitt employed an eclectic style which may have quoted John Ruskin’s rendering of Venetian Gothic but lacked its uniform symmetry. The embellishment was limited to the façade, and the series of façades, producing the streetscape, was criticised as erratic (Davison 1987). Although failing to satisfy architectural purists, these edifices weaved themselves into the urban fabric of Melbourne. The newspaper Argus (1891) declared that the Rialto was ‘without a rival in the city’, and the streetscape was recorded on a 1907 postcard (Figure 4). Over subsequent decades, the area remained recognisable, supporting numerous commercial and social functions, including housing the Jewish Welfare Office, thereby providing many Jewish refugees with their first encounter of an Australian CBD (Liffman 1985). Across the road, the impressive Pitt designed 1888 Federal Coffee Palace was demolished in 1973, and in turn the Rialto precinct buildings were marked for redevelopment by National Mutual.

The Rialto conflict has not been addressed in scholarship since the 1980s. For heritage expert and historian Graeme Davison (1987), the ‘marriage’ settlement over the Rialto precinct was attributable more to political, economic and historical circumstances than any planning or architectural considerations. Historian Chris McConville (1984) earlier argued that the Rialto conflict embodied uneven power relations that privileged the interests of developers and politicians. Only recently have scholars begun to historicise urban heritage during this significant period (the 1960s onwards), noting the exceptionally productive role that heritage might play in renewing cities (ie., Madgin 2009). Histories of Australian heritage written from the vantage of institutions (Witcomb & Gregory 2010) and activists (Burgmann & Burgmann 1998) might thus be supplemented with broader urban (heritage) histories that engage with the complexities of urban life (c.f., Gregory 2009; Howe et al. 2013). The Rialto had broader
impacts for Melbourne and Australian cities and their heritages—impacts that still resonate in
the early twenty-first century as recent events have revealed.

Alongside heritage professionals and the broader urban community, the ongoing conflict over
the Rialto precinct has involved three main groups: developers, heritage activists, and municipal
and state governments. The various ways that these three groups understood the heritage
of the Rialto precinct during the 1970s and early 1980s will be mapped in the three sections
of this article. Each group’s constituents and motivations varied over time, rarely coalescing
to reveal cogent, desired heritage outcomes. This approach therefore yields numerous, albeit
contradictory, insights, which often cannot be tied to specific urban or heritage outcomes.
Rather than offering a linear historical narrative of the Rialto Towers development—which
has been provided elsewhere—the intention of this approach is to juxtapose visions for,
and disputes over, the place in order to disrupt the existing urban heritage system with its
conventional understandings for heritage—as found in heritage lists and consultant reports (cf.,
Clinch 2012). Arguably and perhaps necessarily, heritage systems seemingly constrain historic
places within defined and incontestable boundaries of significance and value, and so struggle
to embrace a plurality of meanings and senses of place (Bandarin et al. 2015; Smith, 2006: 74-
80; Massey 2005; Hayden 1995). Such an approach is productive for historicising heritage as
socially produced urban space—embracing socio-spatial processes (Lefebvre 1991)—and also
helps explain how the developer continuously secured itself advantageous heritage outcomes.

**Activist Heritage**

If we have any pride left in this city can’t we stop crowing about Marvellous Melbourne.
We’re itching to rip down the Rialto, one of the last really splendid buildings left in
Collins Street … Melbourne now resembles the grotesque and pitiful spectacle of a
man slapping himself on the back with one hand and slashing his wrists with the other.
Why not call ourselves Mutilated Melbourne? We may repel tourists but we might still
attract the kind of crowd that likes to watch a nasty accident. (Humphries 1978)

Alongside four other letter writers to the Age, Humphries deplored the ethos that had come to
dominate Collins Street where grand nineteenth-century buildings were being demolished for
modern office blocks. This concern for Melbourne was shared by heritage activists including the

![Figure 4: Postcard of ‘Rialto’, Collins Street, Melbourne, 1907. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H93.48/1.](image)
National Trust, the Collins Street Defence Movement (CSDM), the union movement and many other Melburnians. After National Mutual amalgamated the Rialto precinct by acquiring the adjoining properties, the firm proposed various redevelopment schemes, many of which would have retained significant aspects of the historic buildings. Each of these proposals became derailed due to political bickering amidst increasingly vocal calls for heritage preservation both at the Rialto precinct and across the city (Town & Country Planning Board 1979).

From the early 1970s, heritage activists were instrumental in making the Rialto precinct a popularly recognised heritage space. The Builders Labourers Federation union placed a ‘green ban’ on the precinct. The majority of the Rialto precinct—including the Rialto building (1973), the Olderfleet (1971), Winfield (1973) and the Robb’s Building (1975)—were first classified by the National Trust for their architectural significance. In turn, those places classified prior to 1974 entered Victoria’s Register of Historic Buildings—now the Victorian Heritage Register—including the Rialto at number 41—and were listed on the federal government’s Register of the National Estate. The National Trust had also classified the Rialto precinct as a historical area, comprising of the Collins and King streetscapes in 1973. This precinct had for the most part become an authorised heritage space, classified by heritage professionals, activists and regulators.

The CSDM was the most vocal activist group, motivated and energetic, boasting over 100 members. Members included Bill McHarg, Evan Walker, and Trevor Huggard, who went on to become a developer, state planning minister and lord mayor respectively. Founded in 1976, the CSDM undertook similar conservation studies to resident action groups across Australia’s cities, spoke at town planning tribunals, conducted prominent advocacy work in print (Collins Street conservation 1976) and on Melbourne’s streets, including canvassing at footpath stalls. One of their flyers asked ‘Who Cares about Collins Street’ and then outlined:

- ‘The asset’: Collins Street character is one of elegance, graces, charm and atmosphere.
- ‘The aims’: which included no further development, especially not skyscrapers. (Collins Street Defence Movement 1976)

Their heritage claims were all-or-nothing: positing heritage (existing buildings) against development (skyscrapers). The group was successful over its short-lived life. When it came to the Rialto precinct, they stifled National Mutual’s efforts, whilst also cultivating exposure for this precinct as urban heritage space. Despite their successes in the mid-1970s, the CSDM was not involved in the original National Trust listing of the early 1970s, and had faded by the end of the decade. Despite the loss of the CSDM, the National Trust continued to agitate to preserve the Rialto precinct. As a result of the various heritage listings, any proposal for the precinct’s redevelopment would ostensibly have to be sanctioned by the heritage system, through planning and heritage permits, advice to ministers and other regulatory mechanisms. Similarly, the National Trust also worked within this system, acting as a legislated referral authority. The fate of the Rialto precinct—like much heritage today—was bound to the robustness of this heritage system.

The decisive moment for the Rialto precinct came in 1981. Its new developer, the Grollo Group, presented an initial proposal in January—a 50-storey glass and concrete skyscraper, placing the skyscraper directly on Collins Street and only preserving the Rialto building’s façade (Age 1981). The Grollo Group’s next bid was for 40, 33 and 22-storey skyscrapers located behind the Winfield and Rialto buildings. As required, this proposal was referred by the Planning Minister to the HBPC. The HBPC identified the tri-tower proposal as ‘generally unacceptable’; from a heritage perspective, the plans were ‘overpowering’ and ‘no attempt was made to enhance and emphasise the quality and nature of the registered buildings’ (HBPC 1981: vii, 1). An independent report was also prepared for the HBPC by Melbourne University architecture Professor F.W. Ledger (1981: 7), who surmised that ‘future generations will conclude that lip-service only was paid by this generation to historic building preservation’. Architect Norman Day (1981) called this proposal ‘another case of rape’. The heritage professionals had made their assessments of the development proposal before them, as demanded by heritage and planning legislation, and assessed it unfavourably.
Moving forward to late 1981, the final, approved and eventually constructed conjoined skyscraper plan was never presented to the HBPC for consideration. The only known independent heritage professional consulted was the Chairman of the National Trust, Rodney Davidson. Four members of the National Trust’s urban conservation committee subsequently resigned because Davidson had not brought this proposal to them. A committee member claimed, ‘The trust seems to be losing direction … all credibility’ (Nayman 1981b). Like the HBPC, the National Trust had also been largely disempowered, excluded from the heritage decision making process by the Government, and its membership—and the broader urban community—was justifiably disappointed.

Most Melburnians received word of the approved 63 and 43-storey conjoined towers by reading the Age (or the Victorian Government Gazette) on 27 November 1981. Uproar ensued, and the following February two thousand people descended on Melbourne Town Hall to protest their disenfranchisement in the planning and heritage systems. For these protestors, as Maria Hansen (1982) wrote in a letter to the Age, the government had ‘destroyed all the structures for ensuring citizens have control over what is done to their city’. Melburnians were concerned about their city and sought what today is called participatory (socio-spatial) urbanism. There was indeed a belief by the early 1980s that the heritage and planning systems should represent community interests and therefore achieve better balanced heritage outcomes. When it came to the Rialto precinct, however, the politicians and developers became the final heritage arbiters failing to represent the desires of the broader urban community.

**Government Heritage**

The Government is determined to end the state of uncertainty which has attached to this area for many years and to save and preserve the historic buildings. The Government has agreed to … the proposed development … in order to achieve certainty. This enables the developers to be put in a position where they may exercise their options and commit the substantial funds involved to the project. (Lieberman to Melbourne City Council 26 November 1981)

Seemingly bringing to an end the conflict over the Rialto precinct, Victorian Minister for Planning Lou Lieberman believed that he had achieved the heritage outcome that had evaded his predecessors. After all, in Lieberman’s view, the conjoined skyscraper wholly retained the Rialto and Winfield buildings, as well as the Olderfleet façade, three of the prominent, classified buildings. This development meant a spectacular modern skyscraper that could be used to bolster the city’s marketing image—often posited as an ‘icon’ or ‘landmark’—and also brought about a sizeable financial investment for the city. From northern Victoria, Lieberman was a minister in the Thompson Liberal Government, which wrongly believed that resolving this heritage planning nuisance would improve their fortunes at the forthcoming 1982 election, at which they were subsequently defeated (Davison 1987: 15).

For a decade, confronted with strong heritage activism, the municipal and state authorities had shown inertia and indecision over the Rialto precinct. In 1976, the Melbourne City Council (MCC) delayed a project that would have levelled the site. In 1978, the Hamer Liberal Government formed a committee to investigate the site’s heritage, which included Geoffrey Holland who had been responsible for the heritage conscious redevelopment of Covent Gardens, London. For Holland, ‘the recycling of the Gothic streetscape buildings and integrating them with a modern development [would] create a complex of world [heritage] significance’ (Town & Country Planning Board 1979). As Robb’s Building was only classified by the National Trust, not the HBPC, the MCC issued a demolition permit for it in 1979. The Rialto precinct ultimately became marred in state politics, amidst the resignation of long-serving Premier Rupert Hamer.

Although the MCC (1979) issued various demolition permits for individual buildings, it delayed assessments over the larger precinct proposals. Correspondence received by the MCC from the HBPC was scathing, ‘this case [w]as the latest in a number of cases in which the M.C.C. has chosen to ignore completely our … recommendations’ (HBPC 1979). Examples cited included many Collins Street properties, and specifically the demolition permit issued for Robb’s Building.
At the beginning of 1981, the State Government sacked the MCC over municipal boundary and planning disputes, and appointed commissioners (Saunders 1984). In the following three months, the MCC issued a record $600 million of planning permits (McLoughlin 1992: 62, 183), by requiring all permits—including those involving heritage—to be processed within 14 days (MCCb, 1981). The planning powers of council were not reinstated until the 1990s. (At that same moment Victoria’s ‘25,000 square metre rule’ came into effect, making the Planning Minister responsible for large developments, meaning the MCC never again had comprehensive planning powers after 1981.) When Lieberman pronounced the Rialto Towers decision, the MCC was effectively instructed to issue the relevant permits, a couple of days before the official public announcement.

Lieberman was dissatisfied with the existing heritage system, because it was seemingly unable to resolve disputes such as at the Rialto precinct. Consequently, the Thompson Government began drafting a retrospective heritage bill that disempowered the HBPC and made the Minister the primary arbiter of state heritage (Cain 1981). This bill was never enacted. The problems were not, however, inherent in the heritage system itself. The issue was that the heritage system strove for consensus between developers and activists, which was justifiably perceived as unobtainable after years of conflict, and especially before Grollo’s financial option expired. Consequently, Lieberman intervened to overcome the impasse. Across the year, the Age reported on various Grollo Group proposals for the precinct. In September 1981, whilst a three-tower proposal was still before the HBPC, Melbourne newspapers relayed that the Department of Education was already negotiating tenancy agreements for office space in the unapproved development. The Government entered this agreement to help make the development financially viable for the Grollo Group and its financial backers, and as a compromise for retaining aspects of the heritage listed buildings. By October, the MCC had vowed to assess the application immediately, rather than waiting for the heritage report, to ensure a planning permit was issued by 30 November 1981 (Nayman 1981a). Lieberman demanded that the HBPC hurry its report, and ultimately disregarded its recommendations. Sometime between 14 and 24 November 1981, the three-tower proposal became the final conjoined skyscraper. Each proposal naturally had different impacts on the heritage of the precinct, but no heritage assessment was undertaken on the final proposal. On 24 November 1981, Cabinet approved this proposal—‘as recommended by the Minister of Planning and [the] Public Works [Department]’—and the decision was made public three days later (Cabinet Minutes 1981).

For Lieberman and the Thompson Government, this was the outcome necessary to achieve developer and heritage certainty. In this view, the heritage embodied at the site was contained in the fabric of the existing buildings, particularly the Rialto and Olderfleet buildings, as identified in the heritage registers. In contrast, the attempt to discursively transform the Rialto from individual buildings into a historic precinct by the CSDM, the National Trust and to some extent the HBPC spoke more to treating place as having pluralities of heritage meanings in addition to what was embodied in fabric. What must not be lost sight of, however, was that Lieberman, the State Government and the Grollo Group did preserve some physical aspects of the Rialto precinct’s heritage amidst the larger skyscraper development, even if this fell well short of the desires of heritage professionals and activists.

**Developer Heritage**

Rialto Update … Soon, when the glazing is complete, Australia’s new landmark will be the most exciting building in the Southern Hemisphere. And it will certainly be the tallest office building south of the Equator…Rialto is a building of which Melbourne—and all Australians—can truly be proud … [The] Menzies [hotel] at Rialto is a careful and imaginative restoration of the Victorian Rialto and Winfield buildings whose facades have graced Collins Street since before the turn of the century. The eye-catching Gothic Revival architecture provides a spectacular and approval style for a five-star hotel with strong links to Melbourne’s past. (St Martins Victoria Pty. Ltd. and Grollo Australia Pty. Ltd. 1985)
Where National Mutual had failed, the Grollo Group succeeded. The CSDM and the National Trust had struck at National Mutual with much success. The neat designator ‘Rialto precinct’ was, for instance, employed by the National Trust and CSDM in response to National Mutual’s property acquisitions, binding the various buildings together in the social imagination and empowering stronger activism. Conversely, National Mutual had supported some heritage retaining schemes in the late 1970s. Perhaps unfairly, National Mutual bore the brunt of activist efforts, their proposals coming after so many earlier Collins Street demolitions. As a result of these delays, the Grollo Group entered the fray. Exhausted from years of political wrangling, National Mutual parted ways with the precinct, and the beneficiary was indeed the Grollo Group and its backers. These developers spatially positioned their skyscraper as not only representing sound material progress but also co-opted the heritage narrative at the precinct to produce a powerful heritage space that still remains bound to the site.

The Rialto Towers construction was testament to broader political and economic changes in Australia during the booming 1980s. The Grollo Group partnered with the Kuwaiti government owned St Martins Property Group (Bazoobandi 2013: 33, 51) to acquire the financial option from National Mutual over the Rialto precinct. Walking down Collins Street with company director Bruno Grollo, architect Garry de Preu recalled, ‘He Said, “I’ll have that. I’ll have that. And I’ll have that.”…He bought the option on the site’ (Dunstan 1986b). The option ultimately expired on 30 November 1981, establishing a timeline for overcoming the heritage and planning impasse to realise a skyscraper at the Rialto precinct. In other words, the option became a bargaining chip, proposing an ostensibly immoveable deadline for the urban authorities to approve the redevelopment; for if the Government did not approve a skyscraper scheme by the date the option expired, the developer and its backers could effectively walk away from the precinct having incurred little financial outlay (in comparison to purchasing the properties outright). It was rumoured that St Martins provided the funding for the project interest-free (Robinson 1982). From the outset, moreover, the State Government effectively endorsed the option timeline, to prove that the Government was friendly to large scale urban redevelopment. The unions were overcome too: to have the ‘green bans’ lifted, the Grollo Group offered record entitlements (Legge & Stephens 1982). In other words, the ideological shift towards ‘neoliberalism’ (Harvey 2005) had begun, and so substantial private financial investment was being courted by politicians for cities, which has had dramatic impacts for urban heritage to the present day.

In this shifting political and economic environment, the heritage system proved only as strong as its political masters, especially since the developer had shown little interest in urban heritage. In a glossy weekend magazine profile, Bruno Grollo located ‘all the historic buildings worth looking at … in Paris or London’—he was not an admirer of the Rialto, though liked Melbourne’s AMP and ANZ buildings (Robinson 1982). Designed by Swiss trained architect Gerry de Preu, the Rialto Towers became the Grollo Group’s first skyscraper. The Grollo Group originally sought to level the entire Rialto precinct, but this was not feasible given the actually existing heritage system. So that system instead had to be negotiated, which was done through private meetings between the firm’s representatives and the Planning Minister. Not only did Lieberman approve the skyscraper contrary to his independent heritage advice, but in the course of the skyscraper’s construction fundamental heritage conservation principles were poorly executed. De Preu explained how each nineteenth-century cobblestone was marked with a number and then taken offsite during construction. The cobblestones were, however, improperly stored at the Grollo building yard, and the numbers faded, meaning the cobblestones could not be returned to their original configuration and yet ‘still had to go back and look like they did before’ (Dunstan 1986b). For various reasons, then, heritage had become subsidiary to other factors.

Ultimately, the heritage system was not only undermined by politicians and developers, but also proved unable to offer the consensus heritage outcome that might have at once satisfied activists and other heritage professionals as well as the broader urban community. Despite its initial reluctance, the Grollo Group eventually embraced the urban heritage that it was required to preserve by the Minister. Bruno Grollo stated in 1987, ‘I’ve changed my mind
since then, I think. Six years ago I would have pulled the old Rialto down. Today I would be very sorry I had done it’ (Harris & Stevens 1987). The Rialto Towers indeed marketed the heritage aspects that were kept, promoting the Rialto and Winfield buildings as graceful, eye-catching and spectacular, producing a prototypical developer orientated heritage space for the Australian city.

Conclusion

The Rialto conflict shifted the relationship between heritage and development in Melbourne. Writer and journalist Keith Dunstan (1986a) proclaimed, ‘Let’s disremember Melbourne’ and months later he did by expressing his ‘love’ for this ‘phallic symbol [with] an uncanny resemblance to Moscow University … Melbourne’s Ayers Rock’ (1986b). That same year a promotional advertisement was aired by television station HSV7 (1986), (see Figure 5), with the jingle ‘Hello Melbourne’. For the advertisement, the greeting was written onto the newly completed Rialto Towers in bright lights, the skyscraper captured in all its glory by a helicopter from above. In an ingenious instance of cross-promotion, HSV7, the Rialto Towers and Melbourne were bound together, mutually-reinforcing each other, the precinct seemingly recreated in a way that erased the recent conflict. In the mid-1990s, a school kit was produced by Rialto’s management. The site became ‘The Learning Tower of Melbourne’ from which its observation deck ‘provided a wealth of opportunities for students of all ages to gain an exciting new perspective of Melbourne’ (Rialto 1995). The nine-page kit made no mention of any of the site’s nineteenth-century buildings—only to other nearby historical and contemporary ‘landmarks’ such as the Law Courts, State Library, Royal Exhibition Building, Crown Casino and Daimaru Department Store (at Melbourne Central). The Rialto Towers had became naturalised in the city as a spectacle, meticulously composed to captivate the popular imagination, seemingly erasing the recent conflict.

The compromise between the State Government and the developer placed the façade of the Olderfleet against and Rialto building within a glazed atrium. The Rialto Towers itself was located within a historic precinct, which necessarily also impacted urban heritage. This atrium still serves as an entrance to the skyscraper, which will be augmented by the ‘wraparound’ building (where Robbs’ stood was a concreted open air plaza). When the atrium was first proposed by the Grollo Group in 1981 as a design option for the Rialto redevelopment, the HBPC made little comment on it, awaiting further details from the architect. In contrast, in 2015 the atrium and the historic aspects contained within feature prominently in the latest redevelopment project. Although height and views still dominate, the developer celebrates the ‘rich history’ of the site with curated photographs of the heritage buildings (Rialto 2015).

Today, the Rialto precinct is celebrated as a heritage success (Green 2015), the conflict many decades past and popularly forgotten. Restoration work on the surviving edifices has been undertaken on many subsequent occasions, and the Olderfleet effort received the Australian Heritage Award (1986). Because the original state heritage listings are still active, posterity in some form is most likely assured for the precinct. From street level, these heritage buildings are certainly overwhelmed by the skyscraper, but this is a common fate for Australian CBD heritage. Nowadays the Rialto’s real estate management firm indeed emphasises the nineteenth-century
heritage of the site, rather than the longer contested late twentieth-century history-heritage as part of which the building’s developer featured. The new ‘wraparound’ office building exhibits much historical irony because it is located in almost the precise envelope of the former Robb’s building. If the heritage, planning and broader regulatory system had performed better, Robb’s might still be standing today.

The construction of this ‘wraparound’ in place of Robb’s is more than symbolic—rather it represents how the present day heritage system struggles to negotiate its own past. A reason for demolishing Robb’s was to open sightlines towards the skyscraper from the street, whilst also providing an open public plaza at a prominent intersection. The heritage and planning systems, however, struggle to enforce past undertakings. There is no formal register of buildings lost or compromises made—which developers, architects, planners or heritage professionals might consult—and the state heritage statements of significance for the Rialto, Winfield and Olderfleet buildings have little relevance for this ‘wraparound’ within the existing heritage system. Heritage not only needs a history to reveal the contingencies of the present, but this history must also be incorporated into heritage practice to achieve improved outcomes. Heritage professionals might supplement studies on heritage that emphasise architectural features, fabric and sightlines, traditional measures of heritage value and significance, with studies that also embrace the everyday historical, social and urban spaces and places where both authorised and unauthorised heritage is (and was) located (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Hayden 1995; Massey 2004; Smith 2006).

In the end, the issues of the past are the issues of the present—the heritage system that negotiated the Rialto precinct three decades ago is not dissimilar from the system that operates today. Heritage systems are, by definition, rigid and so struggle to negotiate the contradictory, contested and complex urban spaces and their histories. Our understandings of heritage are always shifting; in recent years through critical approaches such as the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006), practical approaches such as Historic Urban Landscape (Bandarin et al. 2015), or expanded recognition such as for vernacular and twentieth-century architecture (ie., Goad 2013). But our extensive urban heritage system too often lack the flexibility to negotiate such shifts—it struggles to embrace the compassion that might lead to improved, creative outcomes (Lefebvre 1991; Mitchell 2003). For decades, developers, politicians, heritage professionals and activists produced conflicting heritage spaces at the Rialto precinct. Yet these social spaces were neither recognised equally by the heritage system nor in the eventual heritage outcome. Once again, a property developer mastered Australia’s urban heritage, forcing us to question what has been left behind for the broader urban community.
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