Balancing the changing needs of Sydney’s ports

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Abstract
This paper explores the increasing pressures facing the remaining commercial port operations in Sydney Harbour and the way in which heritage issues and heritage professionals are contributing to the future viability of port operations on the remaining port lands. It presents considerations for heritage professionals in exercising their roles so as not to jeopardise port uses and concludes with discussion on whether the preservation of port operations in Sydney Harbour is in greater need of heritage protection than the conservation of structures on these sites.

Introduction
Sydney Harbour has operated as a port since the landing of the First Fleet in 1788 and it was the first port to service New South Wales (NSW). After the creation of the Sydney Harbour Trust in 1901, port operations in Sydney were regulated by the NSW government (Sydney Ports Corporation 2002). The Port of Sydney has played, and continues to play, a major role in the NSW economy. In 2006/07, trade through Sydney Harbour exceeded $10 billion.

Over the past 60 years the working waterfront in Sydney Harbour has undergone dramatic change. The area of port land has significantly declined, primarily due to changes in technology that saw the introduction of containers for handling cargo, together with the increased attraction for and value of waterfront residential development. Containerisation occurred from the 1960s and introduced a fundamental shift in the transport of cargo by ship, from bulk handling and palletised cargo to containers. (Sydney Ports Corporation 2002)

Very little of the original port land within Sydney Harbour is used for port activities today. Where once there were numerous finger wharves where blue collar workers laboured alongside the harbour waters, now these have either been converted to residential and commercial complexes, such as at Woolloomooloo, Walsh Bay and Jones Bay, or have been removed to facilitate the development of large flat expanses to meet the needs of containerisation.

The locations within Sydney Harbour that remain active for commercial port use are experiencing increasing pressure as the land they occupy (which is on the water by necessity) becomes increasingly attractive for residential and commercial development. Further, the community has become more influential in curtailing industrial activities in close proximity to their residences with the ultimate effect being the relocation of the industry.

Remaining port land in Sydney Harbour
The remaining key commercial port lands within Sydney Harbour are at Glebe Island, White Bay and East Darling Harbour. These lands are owned and managed by Sydney Ports Corporation (Sydney Ports).

Glebe Island and White Bay are used for the import of motor vehicles and machinery and bulk products such as gypsum, cement, sugar, salt and vegetable oils (Sydney Ports Corporation 2007a). Until November 2003 the area was also used for container handling and general cargo, such as paper and timber.

Until September 2007 East Darling Harbour was used for the importation of motor vehicles, machinery, containers and cruise vessels. From 2008 this 22 hectare area will no longer be controlled by Sydney Ports. Instead it will be redeveloped by the NSW Government for commercial, residential and public open space. The only port activities to remain on the site will be cruise vessel operations and certain port support services (such as emergency response). The area will become an extension of the Darling Harbour and King Street Wharf precincts and known as Barangaroo.

The Glebe Island and White Bay area also faces an uncertain future, with the motor vehicle trade departing from Glebe Island in September 2008 (Sydney Ports Corporation 2008).
Whilst various companies have expressed a desire to either continue operating or commence operations on the site, due to its deep water access, obtaining development approvals to do so has been difficult. Much of the pressure on Glebe Island and White Bay, as it was for East Darling Harbour, is the lack of buffer zone between the port and adjacent residential uses. As redevelopment of industrial lands surrounding the port and road and rail routes into the Port have been permitted, conflict has arisen between industrial and residential uses over issues such as noise, air quality, traffic, visual amenity and view impacts. Sydney city road congestion also plays a large part in the pressure to relocate port operations out of the harbour.

Without operations at Glebe Island and White Bay, commercial port activities within Sydney Harbour will essentially be a use of the past and requires consideration of the following:

- Is evidence of Sydney Harbour as an operating port worthy of retention?
- Should this retention be the retention of port structures with alternate uses?
- Should it be an operating port whilst there is a business demand for an operating port in Sydney Harbour?
- Should increased pressure from urban encroachment be permitted to result in this historical and founding use of Sydney Harbour being forced out?
- How do we protect, conserve or preserve a use and not just the fabric and infrastructure which supports that use?

Your response to these questions will depend on your experiences and probably where you live but there is a broadening public awareness of, and desire to retain, a ‘working harbour’ in Sydney. For example, a community group called the Working Harbour Coalition was established to oppose the phasing out of the ‘working harbour’ in Sydney Harbour (Save Sydney Harbour 2007).

The Role of Heritage at the Port

Industrial and engineering heritage is possibly more challenging to conserve than other types of heritage as: these items are usually built for a specific purpose and once that purpose is no longer required there may be little other use for them; they may no longer meet relevant building codes or safety standards; or materials and skills used to construct and safely maintain the item may no longer exist or would no longer comply with current safety and environmental laws. These issues are likely to create conflict with normal conservation practice.

Large structures such as those found at the port, occupy scarce port land and are difficult and costly to conserve and maintain. This makes their conservation problematic.

The treatment of structures of heritage significance on and adjacent to the Glebe Island and White Bay port area has had, and is continuing to have, a significant influence on the opportunities for continued use of the site as a port.

What role do heritage, and heritage professionals play in the retention of Glebe Island and White Bay as an operating commercial port?
In my view, there are three important roles:

1. to look beyond individual structures or elements and consider the historical context and use of the site and adjoining sites as a whole;
2. to understand the long term implications of the information documented in any heritage studies and assessments; and
3. to appreciate the way in which the content of these studies and their recommendations will be used by others with differing agendas.

Each of these roles requires proper consideration as there is a tendency to focus on retention of structures. The result may be the retention of an historic structure at the expense of its historic use.

Experience at Glebe Island and White Bay has found that when these roles are undertaken appropriately then the outcomes have been positive and the reverse also holds true. These roles are not isolated to the Glebe Island and White Bay site but apply equally to all port sites.

**Positive heritage outcomes**

Glebe Island and White Bay commercial port area has undergone consistent redevelopment since commencement of operations in the early 19th century, to cater for changing trade needs. There have been a number of examples in recent times where positive outcomes have been achieved, from a combined heritage and operational perspective. Two examples are discussed below.

**Demolition and Adaptive Reuse of Silos**

The Glebe Island and White Bay area commenced operations as a port in the early 19th century. From 1916 to 1921 about 187 individual grain silos were constructed at the site for the storage of wheat. These silos ceased to be used for this purpose from about 1984 when a large grain facility opened at Port Kembla. Alternate uses for these silos were not able to be secured. Due to their age and structural condition, combined with the lack of an alternate use, they were demolished in 1998/1999 to provide the opportunity for continued port use of the site but for a different trade—motor vehicles (Julie Bindon & Associates 1998). A bank of 32 silos, constructed in the 1970s, also for grain storage, was retained as they were structurally sound and alternate uses could be accommodated. In 1994, these remaining silos became used for the storage of sugar and cement and they continue to be used for storage of these products today. They provide a unique and recognisable form in the Sydney Harbour foreshore landscape.

These silos are identified in Sydney Regional Environmental Plan 26 (1992) as having heritage significance. This means a statement of heritage impact must be prepared before any work on these silos can begin. Ongoing modifications to the silos have been undertaken to accommodate the increased ship sizes and improved technology for transferring products from vessels to silos for storage and despatch.

**Relocation of a World War II Commemorative Monument**

As part of works to expand and improve the efficiency of the Glebe Island motor vehicle terminal in 2003, a monument commemorating the first landing of the United States Armed Forces at the Port of Sydney on 28 March 1942, erected in 1946, was relocated (Scott Carver 2003).

The monument was located adjacent to the Glebe Island exit road, which was an inclined road within the port area and isolated from public access. The road embankment on which the monument was sited divided the land at Glebe Island in two. The removal of the road embankment provided for one single area for motor vehicle trade.

In undertaking consultation prior to the relocation it was found that there was very little knowledge of the existence of the monument, despite annual services being held there for decades until about the early 1990s.

The monument has now been relocated to a public viewing area, instead of isolated on the side of the road. This allows the public to appreciate it and for the monument to remain connected to the location that is part of its significance. At the same time it has opened up the Glebe Island area for the motor vehicle trade and assisted with the ongoing and efficient use of the site.

**Causes for Concern**

In 2004 a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) was endorsed by the NSW Heritage Council for the White Bay Power Station, which is located on the boundary of the port land at White Bay. The CMP contains policies that state:

- any development in the vicinity of the power station is to carefully consider its bulk, scale and placement to respect the visibility and prominence of the power station;
- views from major axial approaches to be maintained as substantially unobstructed views; and
- general and changing views, including distant views from the Harbour Bridge, Darling Harbour, Observatory Hill and Millers Point, to be retained substantially unobstructed by other large elements (Sydney Harbour foreshore Authority 2004).
It is noted in the CMP that an approved master plan exists for the port which specifically provides for silos of any height to be constructed at the port. Notwithstanding this, a policy has been included in the CMP that requires the location of any silo to be in accordance with the above stated view-protection requirements.

It is also worth noting that earlier versions of the CMP considered requiring the retention of ‘clear views’, as opposed to the ‘substantially unobstructed views’ that are now presented in the CMP, and also considered imposing 15m height limits on silos over much of the port area. To put the 15m height restriction into context, the existing silos are about 50m high. Such inclusions pose significant risk to the viability of the port as it is the only dry bulk products port in Sydney and bulk products require silos for efficient product storage and despatch.

Fortunately, the submissions by Sydney Ports on the content of the CMP had some impact. Whilst still constraining development at the port, there is greater acknowledgement in the CMP of the importance of the adjacent industrial maritime environment to the heritage significance of the power station.

The restrictions being placed on development at the port by the CMP are unnecessary and inappropriate. What was lacking in the preparation of the CMP was both an appreciation of the historical context of the site in conjunction with the adjacent port operations and an understanding of the implications of the CMP on the future of the port and by association the future heritage implications for the power station.

The assumption being made in the CMP appeared to be that the last development on the site should remain and that development of a greater scale should not be permitted, even though development on the site has varied through time, thus stagnating what has been a continually changing landscape.

Views to the power station have only been a recent phenomenon, arising from changes at the port to meet different trade needs. From 1963 to 1993 the Balmain Coal Loader existed between the power station and the water. It extended across the front and beyond the power station. It was 20m high and blocked some views, and obscured others, particularly from the east. The original grain silos at Glebe Island also blocked views from the east to the power station until their demolition in 1999.

The frequent use of the term ‘substantially unobstructed’ in the CMP, when referring to views to the power station, remains of concern as it can, and has been used to suit individual purposes, be readily misinterpreted and have unintentional consequences.

It is difficult to understand how port development can be constrained in such a significant way, even though Sydney Ports supports retaining the heritage of the power station, new commercial buildings in front of the power station are considered to be appropriate, albeit at lower heights (Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority 2004).

Whilst commercial development may be practical to support the future upkeep and viability of the power station, should this be at the expense of the nearby port use which contains significant heritage in itself and is a significant contributor to the NSW economy? The conservation of the power station may conserve the structure itself but it will not be for an industrial use which is the historical use of the facility. At the same time conservation of the power station, in the form documented in the CMP, may contribute to the loss of the adjacent industrial port use and its heritage values.

**Cement Storage Facility at White Bay**

The concerns foreshadowed by Sydney Ports from the approval of the White Bay Power Station CMP have been realised with a current development proposal for a cement storage facility at White Bay. Whilst there are environmental and amenity issues associated with the proposal, as with any industrial use in proximity to a residential area, the community have used the CMP and the heritage significance of the power station for...
recommendations and requirements associated with heritage matters need to be appropriate, justified and focussed on the most important recommendations to achieve the best overall outcome. In the case of Glebe Island and White Bay, the risk of not doing this contributes to the loss of remaining port uses placing heritage values of the working harbour, as well as the industrial heritage structures such as the silos and power station at risk. The retention of such structures will be subject to their ability to be incorporated into the redevelopment of the site for alternate uses.

When considering issues of cultural heritage significance, the continuing use of an area should be given as much importance, and in some cases greater importance, than the retention of structures for an incompatible alternate new use. There are examples around Sydney Harbour of historic maritime structures being retained, such as the wharf buildings on the finger wharves at Woolloomooloo and Walsh Bay. There are a declining number of examples where port use exists; in my opinion this aspect is in greater need of heritage protection and conservation in Sydney Harbour.

Bibliography


as argument for opposing the development. Whilst the authors of the CMP have submitted that the proposal will assist the industrial scale and use of the area around the White Bay Power Station to remain active and viable, it is understood that the community and NSW Heritage Council remains concerned about the impact of the development on certain distant views, including those views that are only a recent phenomenon.

concluding comments

On a number of occasions heritage requirements have resulted in modifications to works, developments and future uses at Glebe Island and White Bay with consequent financial/efficiency implications for operators and Sydney Ports. Heritage issues are but one of an increasing number of constraints facing operators and Sydney Ports at Glebe Island and White Bay; others include environmental, social and political concerns. And, whilst it is every bit as important, the