Perhaps Arthur Phillip started it all in more ways than one. 1787, still voyaging on his expedition of 1,000 exiles to the Pacific, before even seeing and naming the ancient place he called Sydney: "I would not wish convicts to lay the foundations of Empire", he brooded. Phillip’s lament has reverberated as a scream of insult, resentment and shame throughout Australian history and our psyche: why were we given such poor fodder to build a nation? As Robert Hughes reflected 200 years after Phillip:

Behind the bright diorama of Australia Felix lurked the convicts, some 160,000 of them, clanking their fetters in the penumbral darkness. But on the feelings and experiences of these men and women, little was written. They were statistics, absences and finally embarrassments.

Of course this embarrassment reflects the misguided assumption (I should say set of cultural values) that history is the story of nation building (emphasis on building); a cause and effect pageant of firsts and greats. This saga of origins, this search for bright dioramas and good foundations is demonstrated most through the history of architecture: monuments to the acquisition of 'taste', cairns to the creation of 'civilisation'. How many 'Statements of Significance' of heritage sites call upon this litany of firsts and greats? How completely we seem to have consumed the Enlightenment fallacy. Perhaps Phillip brought it on that Pacific expedition.

The collusion of nationalist history, heritage and architecture has helped Australians to Jobliterate the convict stain. Convictism is seen not as a system of human management but as part of the architectural history of prisons. ‘Out of Sight, Out of Mind’ was the title of a Bicentennial exhibition on penal architecture.

Our subject, Hyde Park Barracks, is a case in point. In its first incarnation as a conservation project and museum in 1984 its significance was demonstrated by being a fine example of an elegant Georgian building in the colony; dubbed the ‘Parthenon of Australia’ by some. It was indicative of the ‘taste’ of Governor Macquarie and its architect Francis Greenway and it was a milestone in penal design.

But if you think of Hyde Park Barracks as a monument to Greenway, a beautiful example of Georgian style, you won’t get past the architecture and touch its darker side. The Hyde Park Barracks is not beautiful but sublime. In his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) Edmund Burke defined sublime as “tranquility stinged with terror”, “the shudder that arouses from the apprehension of one’s unimportance and impotence before grand powers”. The qualities needed to produce terror are obscurity, privation, uniformity, deprivation, solitude, silence, submission. The vast object punctured with small regular intervals, windows and columns casts the eye and mind into relentless tension. While this symbolism was the basis of Georgian architecture, designed to give sublime sensations to gentry owners, it also became the formula for the new vernacular buildings of the Industrial Revolution, as a means to exact work and time discipline. Between 1780 and 1830 warehouses, mills, barracks and prisons adopted the characteristics of the sublime: awesome size, absence of decoration, tough red brick, regular arrangement of windows, contrasts of light and dark, the wall, the gate, the clock. The fundamental agent of the British Industrial Revolution was not technology per se but the implementation of new patterns of work and time discipline over the pre-industrial village economy.

This colonisation of the British working classes was accomplished by the State, rule of law, convict transportation and assisted immigration. Hyde Park Barracks played a small part in this imperial plan. Hyde Park Barracks was neither a unique example of
Georgian 'taste' nor a prison but an antipodean gulag, part of the imperial project for manipulation of labour.

The Barracks were initially built by Governor Macquarie in 1819 to harness skilled convict labour for his ambitious building works. Before this convicts accommodated themselves, especially in the netherworld of the Rocks. The Convict Barracks became the headquarters of the Principal Superintendent of Convicts and the Assignment Board to manage the placement of convicts throughout the colony. The subsequent history of Hyde Park Barracks after the last convicts left in 1848 shows that the early 19th century gulag was not an isolated episode in colonial history but the germ of an ongoing role for the state and courts in the management of labour. The 8,000 convicts who passed through Hyde Park Barracks were followed by as many immigrant women brought to the immigration labour depot from the poorhouses of Ireland and England to be hired as servants and wives. Upstairs a poorhouse was created for those beyond labour. Offices and courts entered the building later as agents of state intervention in welfare and labour: Master in Lunacy, Probate, Arbitration. The 20th century Hyde Park Barracks was dominated by the Industrial Courts: scene of major labour disputes. Equal wage claims were first heard there in 1918 and first granted there in 1972: justice for the great granddaughters of those 'immigrant girls'.

Let's look beyond this brick and mortar edifice of State and legal control of labour and the dispossessed to the passage of ordinary lives throughout its spaces. Here are two convicts from the 8,000:

**John Berry**

1821 tried Old Bailey, stealing a handkerchief, life
1822 Sydney: Richmond Road gang
1823 priva-te assignment
1826 50 lashes, brawling in the Rocks
1826 25 lashes, disobeying orders
1829 private service
1834 married Ellen McCrone
1837 enter Hyde Park Barracks: illegally at large, living with his wife without permission
1837 assigned to the country district to help with the harvest
1838 indulgence granted: Ticket of Leave, assigned to his wife
1841 conditional pardon
1834 sentenced to 7 years for street robbery
1836 Iron gang Vale of Clywdd
1836 Penrith gang for robbery
1836 Harpers Hill Stockade for robbery
1838 Windsor iron gang for assault
1841 Hyde Park Barracks
May A busy year sent to Maitland harvest
July Jamberoo Road party
September working on Sydney Ferry Company (he is a sailmaker)
1842 total of 50 weeks on the treadmill
1843 free

These two randomly selected convict profiles demonstrate the extraordinary geographic mobility between places and experiences that characterised the convict's passage through the gulag. The antipodean gulag was a gulag archipelago. Transportation, sentence to exile, the last of England, began an extraordinary colonial rite of passage through a matrix of rules and regulations, places and privations, rewards and punishments. Each convict's career was a pilgrim's progress through the colonial landscape and the cumbersome bureaucratic system of convictism. Skills more than crime dictated this passage. The hierarchy of indulgences and punishments for secondary offences becomes an index to the shifting patterns of supply and demand for labour in the colony.

This gets us closer to the unique character of the antipodean gulag: an archipelago of sites. It sheds some light into that 'penumbral darkness', that netherworld vision of hell that reflected the sublime terrors of the ruling classes. For the convicts were very much in sight, tramping between sites, cavorting in the Rocks, peopling the spaces in between the official record of structures, surveillance and statistics. These are the places most likely to be left out of the heritage lists. They are the absences, the in-between spaces in the built environment.
Enter the archaeologist, the delver into empty spaces, the digger below ground, the diviner of things absent to the untrained eye. They are the vanguard of a new wave of analysis into heritage sites. For example, excavation of Hyde Park Barracks itself, the Old Burial Ground under the Town Hall, and most recently the Parramatta convict huts. Such sites provide new if fragmentary evidence of human use and habitation other than the imperial intentions determined by the architecture.

Like the archaeologist I shift ground here (in the interest of provocation). If I’ve criticised heritage dominated by architects, the pageant of Parthenons Down Under, is the new wave of heritage by archaeologists going to give us a new gothic landscape of picturesque ruins? For the nostalgia of ruins can conjure up images of antiquity more monumental than classical monuments. Cairns to the gulag still. The Tasmanian historian Richard Flanagan has offered a critique of that colony’s premier convict site as demonstrating the new tyranny of the histocrats: the heritage architects, the conservators, the curators, the industrial archaeologists, the public historians, the heritage managers. They are the practitioners of row bar history, smashing the mirror of the past into a thousand unrecognisable fragments, ready to be catalogued and displayed as historical objects devoid of a soul.

Academic sour grapes aside, a valid warning about the new vogue of vivisection; the relic specialists’ infatuation with warts and all survival.

I’ve come full circle. And this, it seems to me, is where the heritage conservation debate is at. On one extreme we have ‘Rampant Reconstruction’: at worst, a fantasy concocted by connoisseurs of taste, colour swatch in hand; affirmations of the imperial project. On the other extreme we have ‘Epicurean Empiricism’: warts and all fragmentation; so preoccupied with lifeless survivals that it only documents the history of their survival, not their human use. Somewhere in the spaces in between, like the convicts, dwell the gaps. The big issue for conservation remains. What to do with the gaps? Whose cultural values indeed?

This is the challenge we faced at Hyde Park Barracks in attempting a ‘museum of itself’. How to reinstate the gaps, the human presence of the convict (and the immigrant and court reporter) when they have been dispossessed by the system, represented by the building itself, and by history? The key to the Hyde Park Barracks project was a holistic approach to interdisciplinary studies into the things that survive in a dialogue with the gaps and absences of past lives.

To enter the Hyde Park Barracks today is to engage in a dialogue between old and new, past band present, stone and steel, artefact and artifice. No myths of reconstruction, no illusions of reality; you, the modern visitor, bring contemporary attitudes, values, perceptions to bear on the present traces of the past and, more important, the gaps. The first room displays the remnants; not to demonstrate methods of construction but to de-construct the very sinews, signs and symbols of the instruments of enclosure: the building, along with the lash, the leg iron, the uniform, the judge’s wig. This fragmentation is a challenge to precede with the museum journey, to fit the things together and fill the gaps in the official record. As Karl Marx said, “to discover the various uses of things is the work of history”.

If not prepared to take on this challenge, the opposite room is an opportunity to engage a guide, buy a book, take a tour, another set of cultural values.

The ghost stair links the 3 levels/layers of interpretation. The steel stair is not a fetish for conservation purity. On the contrary, it sends the purists in a frenzy. It’s another challenge for you, the modern visitor, to trace the path of the ghosts of those who climbed the absent stairs.

Level 2 is a demonstration of the powers, processes and limits of empiricism. Things are presented in the context of the methodologies used to retrieve and document their survival.

Building fabric displays conservation methods, survivals are preserved and exposed, paint is reconstructed where known, white is used for the gaps. The Archaeology display is empiricism incarnate. It conveys that methodology’s preoccupation with the
history of hiding places and classification into a taxonomy of things waiting to be claimed by their owners. Text hand pictures in the ‘Stories’ room are presented as a dialogue/debate on sources and conflicting views on their intentions. The models of Hyde Park Barracks are attempts at a synthesis of empirical evidence and multi-disciplinary methods. They are our best shot at what went on here. But yes, as one critic said, they remain toylike, for they are not reality. The temporary exhibition spaces on Level 2 are modern rooms within old rooms. Places to present theses: multi-disciplinary collages to explore themes, ideas, possibilities about the past.

**Level 3** is devoted to the convicts because here is where most evidence remains intact: mammoth ceiling trusses, lime-washed walls, evidence to reinstate door openings and joinery, the clock to time the daily rituals of order and compliance. But how to animate this extraordinary place, to reinstate the men who cast their shadows across its spaces?

First, what do we know about the convicts in Hyde Park Barracks from empirical evidence?

**We know the rules and regulation.** But they are presented in the new museum not as a showcased manuscript but engraved on a steel plate like the iron-like routine engraved itself on the minds of men.

**We know their clothes, bed and food ration.** The museum displays one man’s share in his allotted hammock space. Everyman among 600.

**We know name, age, trade, offence, sentence, ship from musters, indents and bench books.** But today they are presented on computer database, the modern equivalent of the indenture book, able to sort and shift names at will.

**We know about surveillance through squints in the wall.** They were probably introduced soon after the first batch of men sent sublime terrors through authorities at the extent of homosexual activities in Hyde Park Barracks.

**We know the look of many flogged backs from detailed reports by Superintendent Slade.** For example the case of Calvin Sampson: stealing a pair of shoes, 50 lashes

Blood flowed at the fourth; the convict cried out at the 18th, and continued crying for a few succeeding lashes; his skin was considerably torn, and blood flowed during the whole of the punishment. This man groaned much, and prayed while suffering his sentence, and afterwards declared seriously that he ‘would never come again’. ... I felt convinced that he suffered so severely as to become, henceforth, more careful in subjecting himself to the infliction of punishment in Hyde Park Barracks...

The modern posed photograph of Calvin Sampson’s back is based on advice from the Head of Casualty at Prince Alfred Hospital on the effect of this lashing.

We know the shape, height and marks of scars and tattoos on convict bodies from the records. The painted cut outs in Hyde Park Barracks museum are not the grinning caricatures of Augustus Earle but taken from workers on the museum project who match the records. But the cast of light and shadow in the spaces is more important than the shape. We know the exact layout and character of hammocks from holes in the floor, rope and jute from the archaeology. The hammocks have been reconstructed not as an ‘interpretative technique’ but as integral parts of the building made for them.

These things are as much as we know from empirical evidence, all from official records, stores and sites. They tell us much, but in the end only as much as the system intended. Even when all the pieces of the official jigsaw are put together the overwhelming impression is not of a rounded personality, not of a real person at all, but a fragmented creature of the bureaucratic imagination, a clownish pastiche that corresponds with nothing except the imperatives of a system keen to keep its books and barracks in order. The gulag was designed not to give voice to the man, but to silence the worker out of human identity.

How to reinstate the lost voices of the convicts at Hyde Park Barracks? The soundscapes on Level 3 (created by Sound Design Studios) repossess the dormitories with endlessly collaging and criss-crossing voices
determined by the modern visitors' own movements through the spaces. The scripts are based on text drawn from the official record, but fragmented, disjointed, coming together and pulling apart official language in flash, slang and profanities, tall tales and trivialities corresponding to the criss-crossing dialogue of convicts beneath the imperial gaze. If you hear only 'a vague but disturbing ambient noise', as one critic did, you hear only as far as the overseers did. If you beat a hasty retreat, as the overseers surely did, you miss the meaning of the gaps.

The sound programme is a metaphor for the historical process that infuses the entire approach to Hyde Park Barracks. The polyphony of criss-crossing sounds, like sources and cultural values, conveys a feeling of history as process, of the contingency of events and intentions, the feeling we, and they, have in ordinary life of unfinished business; of gaps, of things that cannot be said. The Hyde Park Barracks is a museum about history and historical method.

These words echo those of Paul Carter who wrote the superb scripts for the Hyde Park Barracks soundscapes. In his latest book, Living in a New Country, Paul develops the concept of 'post colonial collage' to describe the modern project to recover the spaces in between past words and places. It's a good phrase, with broad application to the current revision of colonial studies. For 'post colonial collage' is not rampant reconstruction of nationalist enterprise or fragmentation of empirical survivals but demands a cross-fertilisation of many voices from the spaces in between. Between race, class, gender, age, ethnicity. Between people with different inheritances and different cultural values. Between methodologies and disciplines. Between sources, survivals and absences. Between sites and significances. Between past and present.

The 'post colonial collage' of places, spaces and voices may signal a coming of age of Australia. A coming to terms with a wounded history of shame and shams; with the gulag archipelago, the Aboriginal genocide and dispossession, the rape of the land and of womanhood. This is what I call nation building. Listen to the convict voices from Hyde Park Barracks, the absent voices from the antipodean gulag.

References

* In the context of post-colonial revisions, the use of the terms 'convictism', 'Antipodean' and 'gulag' warrant some explanation as to their use in this paper. 'Convictism' is used to describe the peculiar system of labour management characteristic of the imperial convict system as distinct from the more specific penal role of sentence for British crimes. 'Antipodean' is used in the strict sense of "places diametrically opposed to each other" (OED), in this case Europe and Australia and as twin poles of the imperial project of convictism, not in the looser description of Australia as the South Land or extremity from the centre, a disreputable imperial view of Australia. 'Gulag' is meant in the popular sense of a forced labour camp, obviously not as the original acronym for the Russian secret police.