CREATING A WINDOW ON THE PAST: Interpreting Industrial History

Robyn Riddett

Our industrial heritage is disappearing fast. Urban consolidation and high land values have had a devastating effect on many inner city industrial buildings and sites which are being turned over to redevelopment. Warehouses, along with many other building types, have been converted to apartments and residences, whole sites have been razed and essential plant and equipment sold off or just dumped. Archival materials have been dispersed or destroyed. During this process few attempts have been made to record the buildings and their activities, let alone keep track of the equipment, with the result that evidence of this important part of our past is increasingly becoming rare and difficult to interpret. On some sites, like Sunshine-Harvester in Melbourne's industrial west, remnant or semi-ruinous structures remain in isolation, devoid of their industrial context, as the only tangible evidence of former vast industrial complexes whose names have become household words. The question needs to be asked: is their retention as is, or in an adapted state, a realistic way to interpret this part of our heritage for future generations?

Unlike other building types, the majority of industrial buildings lack distinctive characteristics which can give a clue to their particular function. They are generally regarded as not being aesthetically pleasing, having largely been conceived as shelters within which a process is contained. They are often only generic forms such as corrugated iron sheds, sawtooth truss-roofed buildings, brick buildings with trussed gabled roofs or simple skillion-roofed lean-tos. Unlike some distinctive industrial buildings, none of these common types give any indication of any particular function or activity carried on within. Consequently their ability to demonstrate the individual processes and activities of a particular industry is limited. However, to see industrial history only in terms of buildings is a narrow interpretation of what industrial history is all about - it is much more than just buildings. In some cases the industrial activity is carried on without any buildings at all, as is the case with shipbuilding.

Industrial complexes are generally made up of a number of elements and activities which are interdependent upon each other and which collectively are all essential for carrying out the manufacturing activity. Frequently none are necessarily more significant than any of the others within the complex and their significance is principally derived from the context of the site overall rather than from anything individually inherent in their character. Key elements include the internal roads within the complex; administration buildings; manufacturing plant; gantry cranes; site services and infrastructure; physical movement of raw materials and finished products; sounds, which are often deafening (have you ever been in a rolling mill?); smells, which are often overpowering (have you ever been in a sugar refinery?); the hazards of some of the processes; the dirt; the heat; the cold, and often the steam and all the hustle and bustle created by the machines and the workers. All of these essentially combine to present a true picture of an operating industrial complex which often cannot be realistically, meaningfully or interestingly portrayed through buildings and static displays alone. Indeed such methods present a sanitised or perhaps idealised picture of industry.

In many instances the industry also extends beyond the factory gate to the surrounding area where there are additional and essential contextual elements relating to social history. These can include workers' housing; the surrounding township - established essentially to support...
the industrial operation: special train and tram lines into or beside the factory, and also the wider historical context including related and dependant industries and the effects of the product on the end users.

A very good example of the problems associated with old industrial sites is the former Ammunition and Ordnance Factories at Maribyrnong and Footscray, which were scheduled for demolition and redevelopment for other uses. The options for retention of buildings were severely limited because of the nature of contamination associated with explosives handling. In one instance the most significant buildings, in terms of demonstrating a particular function and process, were the most contaminated and had to go. The machinery too had to be removed. Given the exciting, but relatively unknown, history of munitions production in Australia it was essential that it be recorded in some meaningful way before it was totally lost. The challenge then was to record both the tangible and intangible elements of the sites which demonstrated the essential and significant heritage qualities of the factories.

In identifying and assessing the heritage significance of the Maribyrnong and Footscray sites, their historic, technological and social values were recognised as being key elements in the story. Their historic significance was seen as part of the wider history of Australia’s defence industries which effectively began in Victoria in the 1850s. Amidst great wealth, derived from gold, and considerable fears of a Russian invasion, Victoria commenced a defence program with the construction of Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road. In the following decades powder magazines were built, ironclad warships purchased, plans to lay torpedoes in Port Phillip Bay were drawn up, and a system of fortifications constructed. In 1888 the Colonial Ammunition Company was established at Footscray. Its products were used in the Boer War and later at Gallipoli. In 1907 a cordite factory was set up nearby in Maribyrnong. Also at Maribyrnong, the Royal Australian Field Artillery Depot was established in 1913-14 enabling the soldiers to move into more suitable quarters than could be provided at Victoria Barracks. Following World War I these sites underwent massive development with the establishment of Commonwealth ammunition, ordnance and explosives factories. Their zenith was reached during World War II when three shifts of workers, mostly women, were employed to keep the factories operating twenty-four hours per day.

An essential part of the historic value of these munitions sites therefore related to their association with events and activities, in addition to the various phases of technology still evident and operational within the complexes. In this context the Footscray site derived considerable historical significance from the fact that it was originally the site of Jack’s Magazine and the Colonial Ammunition Company. At Maribyrnong, the Royal Australian Field Artillery (RAFA) buildings, which still remain, represent one of the first military sites built by the new Commonwealth Department of Defence in 1909. Both sites also derive considerable significance from their local social context and from their vital role in Australia’s defence history, particularly as part of Australia’s war effort during World War II - and it is this aspect of their history which is foremost in the public mind, particularly in 1995 when ‘Australia remembers’.

With regard to the physical elements, some buildings of particular significance were identified for retention and inclusion on the Historic Buildings Register and the Register of the National Estate. However the feasibility of retaining any of the buildings on these sites was restricted because of the particular nature of contamination associated with the explosives industry. Some items of machinery of particular significance, which were not contaminated or scheduled for re-use in the new plant at Benalla, were also considered for relocation to a museum. Similarly the options for retention of the machinery for future display were limited, not only because of contamination but also because of the sheer size of many items which were generally too large to be housed in a museum. What can be done with a rolling mill which occupies a whole building or a gun barrel boring machine (Fig. 1) which is many metres long? In any event this approach had limited value with regard to meaningful interpretation of an industry which has a particular mystique derived from the secrecy and security which necessarily surrounds it.

Figure 2: A lot of the interest in this picture is in the clutter: the operation of the lathe and the finished gun barrels – it would be hard to replicate in a museum.
Figure 3: While stoking the boilers is an essential operation, which is also hot and dirty, it can only really be presented in situ and recorded.

Many of the buildings are of the basic industrial types mentioned above and, in themselves, they convey almost nothing of the ammunition and ordnance manufacturing processes and products. Therefore the significance of the site could not simply be recorded in terms of buildings. And idle machinery housed in a museum conveys its function to only a few - the majority of people would have no idea of its use or significance (see Fig. 2). How do you realistically convey the awesome compression power of the 15,000-ton Davy hydraulic press which acts like a hot knife in butter when pressed down on a red-hot gun barrel just taken from the furnace? When operational they clearly convey more information about the processes but, on removal from their context - both in terms of building and production line - only a very narrow idea of their significance can be construed.

As all industrial plants are developed around a concept of relationships which are inextricably linked to the process, the rich picture of the Maribyrnong and Footscray sites is directly derived from the integrated whole rather than its separate parts. The significance of the sites therefore is the combination of the buildings, infrastructure, machines and people who operated them and otherwise serviced and managed the factory, especially during the World War II period when there was a particular ethos which was an essential part of the culture of the site. To some degree all of this had been variously recorded in the extensive conservation studies which were prepared, and in the corporate history of Australian Defence Industries (ADI) which was also under way. However, the essential element missing from these strategies was one which aimed at recording and interpreting the living history and operation of the factories. Given that the retention of tangible evidence of these industries was limited and because the retention of a selection of a few industrial buildings and relics was seen not to do justice to the real story of munitions production, it was decided to prepare a professionally produced video to present what is a very exciting story. The intent was to convey the broad context at one level and to interpret the detail at another.

The video was shot prior to closure and included archival material and contemporary images of the sites still more or less in full production. Indeed the production run of the shells filmed at Footscray was the last run to be made prior to decommissioning that production line and in itself was also historic. A vivid picture of living heritage was conveyed by the flames of the furnaces, the movement and clanking and crashing of the machines and the handling of recognisable products. Since the sites have now closed and many of the buildings have been demolished the video is the only recent and comprehensive record of the factories in operation: as such it is now invaluable. In writing the script, it was also recognised that the significance of the sites went far beyond the sites themselves and it was important to address them within the broader context of Australia’s defence history and munitions production. For this reason the video was produced to broadcast quality with the view that it was interesting and exciting enough to be shown to a television audience. The chronology of the script therefore began in the gold rich colony of Victoria and the first defence activities, and extended right up to the present. Archival footage from the National Film and Sound Archive and stills from the ADI archives were also included, along with excerpts from the Living Museum of the West’s oral history tapes recorded with former workers at the factories.

The oral history component was particularly revealing about some aspects of the operation. One example was the production graphs in the archives which sometimes showed that production suddenly stopped in a particular area and remained idle for several days. The reason, which was not evident from the graphs, was that there had been an explosion or some other accident which had crippled production. Included in the video was one female worker’s comment that the women were more careful than the boys in handling explosives! Another described the special anti-static and pocketless clothing and rubber shoes that were worn, and the need for strict discipline - rigidly enforced in the factories in a manner akin to a ‘reign of terror’. After all it was dangerous work - and essential to the War effort.

While much oral history relating to the wartime activities of the factories has been recorded by the Living Museum there is little relating to the post-War period. Over the years the factories have been continually upgraded and new plant added as new products were introduced and new
By the way ....... have you ever wondered how they actually make Vegemite? Robyn Ridden

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Figure 5: Take the workers and the cartridge bandoliers out of this photo and all you have left are workbenches, chairs and ammunition boxes - not a meaningful interpretation of the reality of the operation.

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