Sites of consumption on the fringes of urban heritage

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Introduction: Sites of consumption on the fringes of urban heritage

This special issue of *Historic Environment* explores the theme ‘Sites of consumption on the fringes of urban heritage’. This issue brings together the work of a range of Australian-based early career and emerging scholars with expertise in urban planning, heritage studies, and architectural and urban history, whose work challenges and seeks to reconsider the conceptual boundaries of heritage scholarship and practice. As the title suggests, these articles explore the spatial, temporal and conceptual fringes of urban heritage as a category of analysis, by discussing a range of commercial and consumption sites with fraught relationships to formal heritage value. This includes sites whose uses present challenges to ‘authorised heritage discourses’ through their function as landscapes of what might be considered ‘the everyday’ in outer-urban and suburban life (Smith 2006, de Certeau 1984): supermarkets, fast food restaurants, malls and other accoutrements to the twentieth century car-oriented suburb. In addition to this focus, this issue explores the functions of inner urban spaces which are not easily incorporated within monumentalist or cultural heritage narratives of preservation, including urban histories of homelessness, of the economic functions of rivers, and surveillance and policing in public space. Through exploring the complexities of these case studies, this issue seeks to map some of the liminal fringes of the categories of heritage and consider those spaces and categories of use which challenge or sit uneasily with notions of emplaced social value.

Interpreting value in urban space

*Historic Environment* has consistently showcased scholarship which reflects on the boundaries of the urban, as well as on the boundaries of the notion of heritage, and the processes of defining cultural value. This in turn reflects its position as the journal for the Australian chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and its association with the Burra Charter, the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013). From the time of its adoption in 1979, the Burra Charter has been globally recognised for its contributions to broadening the definition of cultural significance as an aspect of heritage value. The 2013 version of the Charter, and the current Practice Notes which inform its application, continue this commitment to diverse and multiple interpretations of culturally valuable places.

Alongside these contributions, the Burra Charter’s framework of heritage value still necessarily functions by differentiating areas of more or less cultural significance, however relatively defined. Any definition of emplaced cultural value, which seeks to present particular places as ‘worth’ conserving, maintaining, preserving, or restoring, must necessarily occur against a context where other places are defined as able to be changed without a loss of significance or
value. Landscapes of the everyday, including suburban fringe locations, retail and commercial sites associated with ‘low’ culture, and even the less documented or unauthorised uses of central urban spaces – marginal practices contingent on regulations – are geographies that are made meaningful through their dynamism, and the way in which they reflect changing uses and social needs from a range of different users and perspectives. These social processes encode historic geographies of meaning which can often evolve, change, or be erased before they can be perceived as having sufficient value or significance to be documented or preserved.

Formal classifications of heritage value and preservation are not, of course, the sole framework through which the value of place can or should be expressed, and yet there are particular landscape forms which are more at risk of undergoing transformation or even being erased before there is an opportunity to even consider them as retaining value. Many of these operate on the fringes of particular categories of value: the fringes of urban space, the fringes of authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006), the fringes of categories of class, wealth or status, the fringes of tolerance by spatial ordering processes like zoning, and the fringes of the recent past, sites which are archaic enough to be considered worthy of replacement, but not yet to be preserved.

Despite undergoing transformation, such ‘fringe’ sites whose use value or cultural value is not necessarily read as monumental, unusual, or specific, are not often formally classified as requiring preservation or insulation from processes of change. (Waterton & Watson 2010; Goad 2013). An example of this trend being resisted is the Melbourne campaign against the proposed demolition of the Yarra Building in Federation Square to be replaced by an Apple Store. The ‘Our City, Our Square’ campaign challenges simplistic definitions of urban heritage as synonymous with age, instead presenting the idea of public space as having an inherent use value worthy of preservation and protection. (‘Our City, Our Square’ 2017). Although, as Claire Miller’s piece in this issue explores, Federation Square is a site which from its beginnings has tensely balanced commerce with civility and political control, the campaign to resist the commodification of a central urban site taps into the idea of a collective monumentalism, a single site of the commons for all of Melbourne.

This option for redefinition is less available to less monumental, more dispersed, and more mundane geographies of the recent past, particularly those associated with forms of consumption through retail, fast food, alcohol and entertainment. Part of what complicates this too is their association with consumption, both physical and economic. The implied passivity of consumption as a social or physical act can multiply the perception of its associated landscapes as being too ‘mundane’, even profane, for attention. Yet geographies of everyday consumption are not necessarily unproductive; rather, they iterate with production and reproduction, and can take the form of encroachment into public space and the exclusion of marginal uses and people.

Such geographies also offer insights into the role of changing policies in the built environment. Systems of zoning and spatial control are part of what make spaces for defined kinds of consumption: through zoning, by-laws, regulations, policing, and myriad street-level ‘smaller prohibitions’ (Valverde’s 1998 term for regimes of alcohol control), urban space is specifically allocated for certain activities. Post-war metropolitan zoning practices more sharply divided consumption and production from homes, and defined space for defined activities, with amenity of the single detached dwelling tending to be put at the pinnacle of uses to be protected (Hirt 2015). Formal separated space for commercial use has come alongside the suppression of smaller informal scales of consumption and transaction, often defined as nuisance such as busking or hawking. Consumption practices are controlled and are themselves controlling: times and forms of sale and consumption are bound up with the trajectories of zoning and other less explicitly spatial forms of asserting order, including the liquor licensing and trading hour regulations that helped both create and undermine the live music venues and milk bars of this issue. Limits are placed (on shop hours, on sleeping in public spaces, on busking, on occupancy); or requirements set (for car parking, for reporting, for security guards). The spaces of the everyday, are therefore also the landscapes where social order is determined and maintained.
Historic Environment as a journal has long operated as a forum for discussions between the wide range of disciplines concerned with the use and meaning of place, from academic and practical perspectives (Cooke 2018). Many recent special issues have explored the challenges of local community narratives of heritage and their relationship to spatial disciplines. Last year’s special issue ‘The People’s Ground’, for example, draws together a range of approaches to social change, intangible heritage, the notion of the ‘forgotten’, and emplaced identities, to consider the tensions between values ‘in place’ and values ‘carried by people’ (Honman & Watson 2017; Buckley & Fayad 2017). Earlier special issues have also engaged with the boundaries and fringes of heritage in a disciplinary or conceptual sense. 2016’s special issue ‘Digital Heritage’ presented digital engagement not only as a means of education regarding physical heritage sites, but as a potential means of creating and evolving new connections, magnifying the resonance of intangible cultural heritage value to core audiences while expanding into new one (Lewi & Smith 2016; Greenop, Juckes & Landorf 2016). In this way, this issue seeks to contribute to HE’s ongoing practice of interrogating and challenging the language with which cultural heritage is defined, expressed, and shaped, through embracing the journal’s broad and inclusive definition of the ‘historic environment’ to include those places less clearly understood as ‘historic’ in themselves.

Contributions – Inner city narratives, city as product

Central urban sites feature in this issue as having contested or complicated relationships with narratives of heritage. Claire Miller, Claire Collie and Marcus Lancaster each examine changes to inner Melbourne, with perspectives on sites increasingly commoditised and marketed to a global audience. The contributions expose different aspects of the often-fraught relationships between sites for consumption, and ideas of public use and value. The contributions suggest that when cities are revived and rebranded as products in themselves, aspects of the marginal and un-valorised past are often displaced and erased, both physically and from narratives of heritage.

In ‘Consuming the Yarra’ Marcus Lancaster tracks the fraught relationships between rivers as places of production, consumption, or as site to be marketed and consumed in themselves as part of city regeneration programs. Lancaster presents a consideration of the Yarra River, long regarded in terms of being unassuming and brown, as more than a backdrop to Melbourne’s built heritage, and as a dynamic site of consumption and economic production in itself. Resisting the essentialising of the river into binaries of ‘natural’ as opposed to ‘cultural’ heritage value, Lancaster’s work incorporates a range of approaches to river history in order to demonstrate the centrality of water as well as land to the very existence of urban Melbourne.

Claire Miller, in ‘Consumption as Control’, explores the historical development of practices of consumption and securitisation at two inner urban sites: Federation Square in Melbourne, and Trafalgar Square in London. Focusing on the fraught relationships between regulated forms of consumption, unsanctioned practices, and surveillance, Miller charts on the one hand the shift in Trafalgar Square from a site notorious for vice and dissent, to a gradual domination by regulated activities. This is contrasted with the more recently constructed Federation Square, within which commerce had an early place. Miller uses controversy over the 2018 Apple Store proposal for Federation Square to consider tensions between ideas of the commons, ideas of authorised and controlled use of space, and the implications of these for categories of ‘use value’ and cultural meaning. She frames inner urban squares as sites where the relationship between civics, civility, participation and political control are tensely and actively contested. Efforts to control, secure and brand both public squares reveal the subtle policing of which sorts of activities are normal or marginalised.

Claire Collie critical reappraises Melbourne’s narrative of a dormant inner city ‘doughnut city’ reinvented over recent decades as a ‘café society’, by providing an overlooked counter-story showing the inner city as a place that once housed its homeless including through low-cost boarding houses. Collie shows how the consumption-based revival of the Melbourne CBD over recent decades hinges on a narrative of reviving what was once simply a hollowed-out core. The role of heritage in such spatial transformations shows what is, and is not, valued or valorised in urban landscapes, with enduring implications for those who have been abandoned.
in the process. Showing the justice implications of displacement, Collie examines how planning imaginaries of what constitutes urban heritage are the product of both planners’ looking and looking away. Arguing that heritage is the things we keep telling ourselves, often entailing overt erasures, Collie presents a counterpoint to potentially homogenising, celebratory narratives of gentrification in inner-urban Melbourne history, highlighting their predication on the erasure of Melbourne’s homeless citizens from narratives of economic ‘success’. As in her quote from a housing advocate, the nature of memory in Melbourne’s inner core may be ‘simply that people live in the city and they don’t want to see complexity unless it’s complexity that makes money’.

**Contributions: Rise of the everyday**

The articles in this issue also raise questions around the cultural meanings of everyday landscapes, and the ways in which the politics and processes of consumption shape urban environments. These ‘fringe sites’ of consumption, whether on the fringes of the urban, the fringes of the recent past, or the fringes of traditional concepts of heritage value, present challenges to the boundaries of heritage studies from across a range of disciplines. Several contributions trace the impetus in Australia of standardised retailing models and chains: perhaps thought of as placeless or timeless (or at least designed to feel as such; the ‘annihilating space’ as in Cronon’s 1991 description of the Chicago meat industry), such stalwarts of post-war mass consumption of food, drink and entertainment, including supermarkets, fast food restaurants, corporately owned malls, suburban ‘pokies’ pubs, and bottle shops amongst many others, displaced preceding models of retailing and created their own spatial and temporal patterns.

As in Andrew Murray’s piece on fast food, and Hoffman et al on supermarkets, post-war suburban development models coincided with the recasting of Australian culture during a period of internationalisation, both real and aspirational. Perhaps because these sites once seemed an inevitable, ubiquitous (resented) ‘new’, it can be jarring to see some of the features of post-war mass consumption as themselves being relegated into the fringes as new models arrive. In so doing, they slip also into the contested fringes of heritage. Some, like the supermarket, the bottle shop, the fast food restaurant, and the mall, have become entrenched, although this continuity disguises dynamism in their built forms over time. Often also disguised is an increasingly corporate, centralised ownership; the shift in supermarkets from experiments by sole-operators and licensed grocers, through to the recent upsurge in supermarket chains with increasing shares of large format liquor stores and gaming machines. So too, the absorption of diverse early Australian fast food chains and designs into more familiar models.

The ‘Malvern Victory Supermarket’ article, by Ariele Hoffman, Victoria Kolankiewicz, David Nichols, and Catherine Townsend uses a case study to show how, like the American fast food chain, the notion of the supermarket, so ubiquitous for most of the second half of the twentieth century as to be mundane, was once an exotic rarity for Australians. Retailing in Australia underwent significant change in the 1950s, initially with a shift toward the modern experience of self-service in grocery chains and proto supermarkets. The Malvern Victory supermarket story provides an example of early forays into the world of the supermarket in Australia, with small grocery stores often ambitiously labelling themselves as supermarkets. The emerging model of shopping with gleaming signs, air conditioning, car parks, women in cars was a glamorous and much-advertised novelty. The colorful story of the Malvern Victory Supermarket interweaves the story of cinemas, Jewish and migrant identity, modernism and émigré architects. The authors argue that architecturally, the Victory Supermarket represented the juncture that shopping in Melbourne had reached by 1956. There was an awareness of the modern supermarket type, yet few Australians had directly experienced a supermarket. The Malvern Victory Supermarket shows the points at which consumer expectations recalibrated for the modern supermarket shopping experience.

In ‘A Faster Taste’, Andrew Murray uses the Red Rooster chain to examine how, in response to the arrival of international fast food chains, there was a small but concerted effort to produce an Australian fast food industry. He argues for the significance of the fast food restaurant as an architectural type and explores its place as a difficult heritage site which emerged amidst the international recasting of the Australian city in the post-war era. As Murray observes, scholarship
on the fast food industry within the Australian cultural and built environment is scant. Rather, fast food has been assessed predominantly in terms of health and societal impacts. A challenge is that from a heritage point of view is that the significance of the fast food chain is often less physical than in their model: a ‘systematised, streamlined approach applied to multiple stores’. This defining feature is also what created the same sense of anonymous character and overwhelming ubiquitousness, the ‘hidden in plain sight’ nature of fast food. Nonetheless fast food chains in Australia adopted a uniquely ‘browned’ architecture: there were clearly local chains (led by companies like Red Rooster but including others such as the fabulously named Mr Chips), and locally specific features. With few extant examples remaining of early designs, including the ‘western’ motif, the fast food restaurant offers an important yet difficult site for future heritage study.

Contributions: Zoning consumption and its fringes

The contributions in this special issue speak to spatial ordering and the cumulative effects of the layered rules and regulations, by-laws, controls and policing practices that shape where consumption occurs and on what terms. A narrative of twentieth century cities transformed purely by economic force, by consumption demands and trends, would overlook the iterative role public policies play in creating the built environment and spatial patterns in it (Valverde 1998; Hirt 2015), even if sometimes unintentionally. Planning definitions have shaped the standards of many of the suburban consumer sites examined in this issue, amongst many others. The process of inner urban renewal, conversely, has involved shifting planning definitions to be more accommodating of some new uses over others. Boarding houses and low-cost (low-standard) hotels tend to have been coded out of new residential suburbs and, more recently in both de-jure and de-facto ways, eroded by inner urban renewal (as examined in Claire Collie’s piece). The neighbourhood milk bar stands as a casualty of planning categories, amongst other factors of course but amongst them of an explicit post-war planning enthusiasm for ‘American-style’ large scale malls. Sites of consumption that once were new and profitable niches, now fade into the contested and nostalgic fringes of heritage and re-use: the live music pub, and the milk bar.

The contributions (including by Collie, Miller, and Taylor) often touch on unsanctioned or ‘vice’ consumption such as alcohol, public drinking, prostitution, vagrancy and homelessness, and busking, things public policy tends to try to zone ‘out’, and showing how even while aspects of marginalised public behaviour have been decriminalised over time, new forms of ordering have been re-asserted. Alcohol consumption and its shifting place in cities is shaped by the regulation of time, space, bodies. The intersection of alcohol and consumption is central to two of the articles on bottle shops and on pubs/hotels. Alcohol and the ways it is shaped threads less overtly through the themes of supermarkets, public space, homelessness, and of fast food restaurants and milk bars – the latter two for a long time specifically excluded, in Victoria, from selling alcohol owing to their residential and ‘family’ status.

Elizabeth Taylor in ‘Bottles in Big Boxes’ presents a consideration of the history of liquor licensing regulations in Victoria, through tracing the history of ‘bottle shops’ and the geographies of consumption associated with takeaway alcohol stores. This article proposes that the history of Victoria’s bottle shops is at once a history of consumption and regulation, and that through tracing these tensions, these sites are able to reveal broader histories of suburban and regional social attitudes, economic development, transformations of public and private space, and the role of governance and policing in shaping everyday life. She examines the history of regulations applicable to bottle shops in Victoria, corresponding these to changes in location, layout and design moving from earlier licensed grocers and wine merchants; through to the rise of contentious ‘big box’ liquor outlets in suburban areas. Taylor argues that bottle shops, and the deceptively mundane regulations that continually shape them, reveal broader conflicted relationships between regulation, urban form, consumption, and liberal ideals. She suggests that for each step toward the ideals of liberalised consumption, come renewed fears of the violence and spatial disorder associated with alcohol, and renewed efforts to contain its place in cities.
Rebecca Clements tracks the arrival and spread, largely in the inter-war period, of the Australian ‘milk bar’ or corner store (also known as a deli, amongst other terms), a local interpretation of the trend for American ‘soda fountains’. Although once ubiquitous in Australian suburbs, these local businesses now predominantly occupy the space of nostalgia of the memories of those who grew up walking to them, or within the migrant families who usually operated them. Clements argues that key features of the milk bar were their accessibility by foot; being, almost by definition, local and walkable, and their informality, offering a sometimes chaotic range of products managed by small operators. She argues the near-terminal demise of the milk bar is not only a reflection of changing consumption preferences, but the outcome of post-war planning practices that have prioritised car-based access and large, separated, corporately managed shopping malls. Clements critically reviews how planning policies eroded the neighbourhood milk bar and actively facilitated larger, centralised retail models. Equally, she sketches out some of the nostalgia for milk bars and suggests this reflects an underlying value. Milk bars would be difficult to build in new Victorian suburbs, given zoning and minimum parking rules. They would also be unlikely to compete given changes to trading hours, amongst other factors. Of past milk bars, few retain their original function, while others have been converted to homes, or (as per the twenty first century enthusiasm) to cafés. While heritage attention to milk bars has focused on built form including of signage, Clements argues that milk bar nostalgia more broadly points to lessons for how to more progressively plan for accessible, local, diverse sites of consumption: of how to not merely remember, but to reimagine the local milk bar into the future.

In ‘A Place to Play’ Sarah Taylor considers the recent historical geographies of two forms of entertainment offered in Australian pubs and clubs: Electronic Gaming Machines (colloquially poker machines, ‘pokies’ or fruit machines), and live music. Examining quantitative and qualitative changes in Melbourne and Sydney over recent decades, she uses a comparative lens to draw out local variations in broader social and economic changes to live music performance in Australia as well as to the use of the licensed and commercial space of pubs. The article shows how live music became associated with licensed venues in Australia in the 1970s, with a heyday of ‘pub rock’ during which live music was a profitable feature of pubs. Between the 1980s to the 2000s, descriptions of live music in Australian cities changed to something deserving of, and in need of, protection. One factor cited in this decline, particularly in Sydney, was increasing competition with pokie machines. Taylor combines maps of live music and pokie machines in each city over time, with qualitative material describing interactions between poker machines and live music participants. A key difference Taylor shows is that in Sydney since 1997, most pubs have some poker machines, while in Melbourne since 1992 some hotels have many poker machines. She argues these patterns reflect regulatory details (notably differences between states on pokie machine ownership) not designed to influence the practice of live music, but with effects keenly felt by music participants. When pub space became occupied by poker machines, this tended to provide a visible manifestation of change in live music, with seemingly greater impact in Sydney than in Melbourne. An irony is that as live music has been afforded increasing status as a cultural selling point for cities like Melbourne, it has become an increasingly marginal practice contingent on pubs and their regulations, and one where music participants are rarely paid. ‘Selling out’ retains its potency even in a city sold with live music.

Conclusions

Cities are marketed as sites for consumption, often on an international scale. Whether narratives like the ‘cafe society’ are new in this sense or simply newer manifestations, it is apparent that cities like Melbourne are often branded with the cultural credibility of the same commercially marginal activities that they also seek to limit – either directly through zoning and securitisation, or indirectly through competition with more profitable uses of space. International chains and standardised formats of consumption have spread alongside their counterpoints: of cities more keenly seeking to identify and protect their own spatial heritage.

The contributions in this special issue illustrate how cities normalise certain forms of consumption, while controlling others or other uses of space. The same dynamism and ‘low’ cultural status of commercial sites that puts them at fringes of heritage value, also makes them immensely powerful in reshaping cities and experiences. The chain store, feared as annihilator
of space and time and local character (as in Taylor 2015), still has, as Murray in this issue suggests, its own dynamic and local built heritage and is closely entangled with processes of regulation. This complexity informs some of the discomfort and uncertainty around how the heritage value of sites of consumption are understood and contested.

This special issue of Historic Environment showcases some of the uneasy relationships between sites of consumption – those at the spatial, temporal and conceptual fringes of urban heritage – and social or formal heritage value. In doing so, this issue builds on Historic Environment’s ongoing exploration of the challenges of defining, articulating, and preserving valuable landscapes, and of documenting and understanding their value from a range of perspectives.

References


