INDUSTRY
IS THERE A PAST IN THE FUTURE?
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At the moment and to many Australians the question probably is: “Industry: Is there a future?” I observe that Australians are becoming extremely self-critical and negative about their capacity to support creative industry, and at best can be found suggesting that it is too late for the country to lift its game as an industrial nation.

The view seems to be that we have become a nation reliant on “non productive” areas of the economy and employment in the more “productive” and creative areas of the economy has fallen away.

What does this have to do with the past or alternatively what does the past have to do with this?

Australia has a unique industrial heritage absolutely brimming with examples of inventiveness, ingenuity, innovative design and entrepreneurial skills. If these are the characteristics we wish to develop as a nation then we have to ensure that Australians are appropriately educated. One important part of any such education is to look at what has gone before. In other words using the past as an educational tool.

We do wish to develop the more creative and innovative aspects of this country and as a result the past will play an important part.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?
In the simplest terms we have to:

1. Discover what is important about our past
2. Ensure that the best is kept and is available for interpretation.
3. Interpret or explain what it is all about.

The first part is better known in conservation jargon as “IDENTIFICATION”.

The normal process of identification involves discovering the place or thing, researching its history, describing it and not only making a judgement about its significance, but stating in clear terms what that significance is.

There are particular problems in pursuing this process with industrial sites.

a. They are often vast.

Sites like the Massey Ferguson complex at Sunshine posed such a problem for the Historic Buildings Council. Basically acres of galvanised sheds it was extremely difficult to come to terms with what was of particular significance about the physical remains of this complex. In the end it was accepted that virtually the whole site was significant, but that some pragmatic decisions would need to be taken as to what should ultimately be kept. Care needs to be taken that those pragmatic decisions are not made too early. ie: at the identification stage. Rather, they should be seen as a subsequent management and policy exercise. The temptation in this case was to say right at the beginning that the only significant part, if any, was the architecturally prominent clock tower. Obviously Massey Ferguson means a great deal more to Australians and the people of Sunshine than its clock tower. As the statement of significance finally indicated it was important as a mass employer of people and a substantial and innovative industrial enterprise.

b. They are often little more than building shells.

The industrial process which was carried out in the building is little more than a memory and its significance as an industrial site relies on memory. Buildings like the original General Motors operation in South Melbourne (now the headquarters of Red Cross) have been converted to modern office accommodation and display very little evidence or information about the establishment of General Motors in Australia. The question must be asked; is the building, as opposed to the site, really significant? Another more current example is the former cable tram engine house which was situated on the corner of Bridge Road and Hoddle Street, Richmond (now demolished). This building’s architectural form and siting was very evocative of its original use, however it contains no equipment or substantial evidence of that use. Is it significant in industrial terms or is it just an historic building? There is no reason, of course, why this latter structure shouldn’t be identified and protected as an
historic building and at the same time act as a reminder of a substantial engineering enterprise. In the General Motors case, however, by adopting a simple “preserve it” approach we could be left with a meaningless concrete office building. Just like the Massey Ferguson approach it is important that we clearly spell out what is important about the place and move on to the question of the appropriate level of preservation and protection as a subsequent exercise.

c. They are often buildings left with incomplete evidence of the industrial process contained within them.

I refer to buildings such as Smeaton Mill or the Victoria Parade Brewery. Both these structures are major examples of industrial enterprise with stunning remnants of the process which was pursued within them. However the machinery and equipment in both places falls far short of the total process for which the buildings were constructed.

d. Can be operating and therefore in a constant state of change.

Care needs to be taken in evaluating the significance of such places so as to ensure that the needs of a dynamic and changing operation doesn’t impede the accurate assessment of significance. Whilst the needs of the operation might subsequently call for the alteration of the place, such needs should not be allowed to cloud what is significant and what isn’t. This attitude prevailed in the case of the Brunswick brickworks. For obvious reasons the management of the brickworks were very concerned about an identification which was broad. What the company failed to understand was that there was no intention to impede its operations (in fact quite the opposite) and the issue of continuing operation and change needed to be handled as a subsequent issue with matters of significance and economics taken into account.

e. Important industrial operations do not need to be related to buildings.

A system or process can be difficult to establish in concrete terms and as a consequence different ways of stating significance need to be found. Alternatively some important industrial undertakings, whilst supported by physical infrastructure, are not apparent or obvious to the population as a whole. The Melbourne sewerage system is a case at point. Whilst that system has left some substantial physical remnants much of it remains hidden from general view. Once again this shouldn’t impede an accurate statement of what is significant.

It is important that the significance of the place is spelled out at the time it is examined; not just what its significance may have been at some time in the past. Its history is important in providing reasons as to why a place attains importance, but does not provide significance on its own.

It is also important that we are not persuaded by images of what a place’s significance may be if certain things were to happen to it at some time in the future. Those things will ultimately (if they occur) form part of its history and therefore add to its significance, but those components of significance can’t be claimed until they have occurred.

As a consequence we must accept that a place’s significance will alter with time and it is not unrealistic to assume that significance will be re-examined from time to time. It is important, however that the initial assessment be sound and a decision that a place is significant is taken so that subsequent history isn’t able to easily overturn that decision.

At any time, and for any place, the determination of importance and the establishment of significance must be such that any statement outlining the reasons for that significance must be precise, specific and clear. As society becomes more sophisticated in handling the process of preservation and protection it becomes less able to accept the sort of rash generalisations which passed for statements of significance or citations in the early days of building listings.

Because of these sorts of problems, it is imperative that these generalisations are avoided and that as a society we focus on the precise reasons for importance so that the subsequent processes of protection can be pursued.

**PROTECTION**

The process of protection is about ensuring that we keep the important parts of our heritage in such a way that they are available for interpretation.

To many in the community protection is seemingly magically achieved by some sort of listing, be it by the National Trust, the Historic Buildings Council, the Institution of Engineers, the Heritage Commission or some other agency. This is of course nonsense. Placing something on a list does nothing other than place it on that list.

A consequence of certain listings is that forms of statutory protection follow. ie; there are
legal limits as to what can be done to that place. Such legal constraints, however, in themselves don’t ultimately protect the place. What does is protective ownership and management. In other words an owner/manager who understands the heritage significance of the place and manages it in such a way as to protect that significance is going to ensure its long term future far more effectively than some legal constraint.

It is worth looking at the available legal mechanisms.

1. The Historic Buildings Act and its Historic and Government Buildings Registers provides legal sanctions to a number of industrial sites. I have already mentioned Massey Ferguson, the Victoria Parade Brewery and Smeaton Mill. Others of particular interest are:

- Bryant and May factory, Richmond.
- Spotswood Pumping Station.
- Days Mill, Murchison.
- New Works, Lakes Entrance.
- Eldorado Dredge
- Murmungee Water Wheel.

I will come back later to some of these examples to discuss some of the difficulties in protecting these sorts of places. These difficulties often stem from the same sorts of problems mentioned in relationship to identification and specification of significance.

The Historic Buildings Act requires that permits be obtained before any registered place can be altered, demolished or subdivided. A permit is achieved by demonstrating to the Historic Buildings Council that the place’s significance won’t be irreparably damaged by that alteration or alternatively that economic factors concerning the place make it necessary for the alteration to occur.

For example it took no less than 3 hearings for the developer/owner of the Victoria Parade Brewery to successfully argue that the significant brewing tower no. 2 and its contents need not totally remain for the significance of the site to be largely maintained.

2. Local Planning Schemes are increasingly becoming the way in which places of importance are protected. For example this former malthouse is listed in the planning scheme which covers this area and approval had to be given for the way in which the site was developed so as not to interfere with the perceived importance of the place. Because these planning controls are seen to relate to the external fabric of buildings only, any important machinery and remnants of industrial process were not subject to these controls. Obviously if local planning controls are to be used as an effective legal measure to protect industrial sites they are going to have to be broad enough to deal with more than building fabric.

At this point I must make it clear that listing by the National Trust doesn’t attract legal protection nor does listing on the National Estate Register except for property owned by the Commonwealth Government.

I mentioned earlier the importance of protective ownership in ensuring the retention of our significant industrial heritage. To many the ultimate form of protective ownership is where the State or some benevolent organisation (National Trust, Historical Society) acquires it for that purpose. To date a number of places (Days and Smeaton Mill as examples) have been acquired by the State, but in the main we must expect that most of our industrial heritage will remain in private hands, and have to be used, either for its original purpose or in some adapted way. Unfortunately, therefore, there are going to be times when compromises must be accepted. The trick is to ensure that the best compromises are made and that we don’t give away the true significance of these places too easily.

Some of the places mentioned earlier are good examples of the difficulties experienced in providing real protection as opposed to providing legal protection.

The first problem is fragility. Whilst to many of us industrial sites seem particularly robust there are in fact a good many which are extremely fragile and need extraordinary care to maintain and protect. I refer in particular to many of the mining sites and places like the Murmungee Water Wheel. The problem we face with these sorts of sites is that they often weren’t built to last for ever and in a case like the Murmungee one its ‘restoration’ may destroy its importance.

A further problem is the one of obsolescence in an ongoing industrial operation.

For example we could hardly expect modern wine making operations to successfully continue using the wine making technology of our grandfathers. The answer, of course, is to try and maintain the remnants of the past in conjunction with the modern processes and using the two to provide greater interest to the interpretation of the place.
A third problem pertains to the conversion of places of industrial significance to other uses. I mentioned earlier the protection of the former Victoria Parade Brewery, planned to be converted to offices and the former Bryant and May match factory in Richmond, recently converted to offices. Both cases set out to maintain a real semblance of the industrial significance of the site whilst making effective use of the buildings for offices. This was a massive problem. A problem exacerbated by the practice of industrialists of removing the important machinery and processes before they vacate sites. It seems that very often this removal takes place, not as a consequence of requiring the machinery for operation elsewhere, but out of a desire to hold a clearing sale, thereby spreading important elements of the place to the four winds.

The final problem that I wish to mention in this regard is one which is not exclusive or peculiar to industrial sites. It is the one of scale and cost and the related issues of available preservation technology and knowledge.

The Eldorado Dredge, acquired by the Crown and now managed by the Department of Conservation and Environment is such a case. The questions constantly being asked with this place are: How do we maintain it? (should it remain on the bottom of its pond or should it be refloated?) and: How do we fund such a massive preservation exercise? Similar questions asked in the past of the Spotswood Pumping Station have hopefully been answered by its incorporation into the new Museum of Science and Technology, but that is not a feasible answer to all such problems.

What management options are available to assist the protection of these places? Government has over the years assembled a range of incentives to assist individuals to keep places of heritage significance. They include:

- financial grants
- low interest loans
- relief from rates and land tax (albeit rarely used)
- special land valuation procedures
- advice and technical assistance.

In the main these forms of assistance have been designed to assist the owners of historic buildings, and their effectiveness for industrial sites must be questioned before being adopted as the automatic answer.

There is a real need for the industrialists and conservationists to get their collective heads together to consider the forms of assistance, preferably of a low cost nature, to provide for the special needs of industrial sites.

The value of technical advice and assistance to people setting out to protect and preserve historic buildings should be reinforced and the consequent desirability of establishing a network of similar advice for industrial sites should be explored.

**INTERPRETATION AND EXPLANATION.**

It is not good enough to assume that the community is going to be willing to endorse the keeping of something just because its old and its there. There is a real need to find reasons for keeping things, whether they be pretty old buildings, inconspicuous archaeological sites or large and seemingly derelict industrial sites.

The reasons usually provided are that these places provide us as a community with a sense of identity and provide opportunities for education.

Industrial sites offer remarkable opportunities for dramatic interpretation and education. Other papers in this series have amply described some of those opportunities.

This interpretation does however pose some particular problems.

- ensuring that interpretation is meaningful. It is critical that we protect and present places in context. The preservation of a steam tractor in a park might provide a wonderful piece of playground equipment, but it is hardly assisting anyone come to an understanding of the way it worked, what it did and where it would normally operate. So before that piece of machinery is dragged out from behind the machinery shed and set it up in the park think about how it is best presented to provide a justifiable reason for its preservation and protection.

- deciding what should be freely available to everyone and what is too fragile to be widely accessible.

Obviously the Murmungee Water Wheel, hidden away in the bush and known to few people, will be best preserved by remaining that way. The intrusion of a lot of visitors on this site
would put the structure under incredible pressure. Making that structure useful in educational terms will take a different approach than simply opening it up for inspection. It is with such fragile structures and objects that the museum environment comes into its own. The curatorial skills available from within good museums make it possible for fragile objects to be presented in a manner which minimises the threat.

Finally, and probably most significantly, finding the resources to get beyond the identification and protection phases.

This is an inevitable problem and shouldn’t be seen as a reason for not identifying and protecting things. ie; the non-availability of resources to present them to the community. The objective should be to protect things knowing that they are important and that they have the prospect of being useful in interpretative terms.

In concluding I can only repeat industrial sites offer remarkable opportunities for dramatic interpretation and education and it is only too obvious that the Australian community has a lot to gain from the creative and innovative activities of its forebears all of which is represented by the industrial places of the past.

There is room for the past in our industrial future. It is imperative that we look at it more seriously as a source of inspiration.