INVENTORIES AND THEIR ROLE IN MANAGING RAILWAY HERITAGE

Meredith Walker

Introduction

OF ALL the forces that influence the pattern of settlement of Australia, the most dominant are the natural resources of the country and its perceived suitability for development, and the methods of transport and communications.

From the mid-nineteenth century till the early decades of the 20th century, the railways were the major means of land transport for both people and goods in Australia. Places not connected with the railway did not thrive, or if they did, the railway was extended to include them. We are all familiar with the general story of the development and decline of the railways, and each of us knows something of the intricacies within that story.

The railway is a system - a tightly interwoven set of influences and components, in which each component is of value. Each station is of value as part of a system and also in its locality. This might seem a self-evident truth - that without individual components you don't have a system: and that within the history of a locality or region, the railway is always a major factor in development and local life. The conclusion to be drawn is that keeping only a sample of places in a system will not adequately represent a system, and it will not represent regional or local history. It is important to note here that a major criterion for the Register of the National Estate is 'important in the course, or pattern, of Australia's cultural history', in the draft criteria for the NSW State Heritage Inventory, a major criterion is 'significant in the evolution and pattern of the history of NSW'; the railway system is a pre-eminent example of a work that meets those criteria.

Inventories in New South Wales

In practice, there have been several approaches to the identification of railway property of heritage value.

The first approach has been to identify stations and other major buildings when they came to the notice of listing organisations: for example, the National Trust might identify a station during a survey of a town; or consultants undertaking a heritage study might identify a station (and other components of the railway such as houses) whilst undertaking a study for a local council.

The second approach has been that of sampling - of assuming that a reasonable expectation might be to retain a sample of buildings and other features on a statewide basis, and based on a general knowledge of the types of components and their occurrence. This approach is the one used by the sub-committee of the Railway Heritage Committee in NSW. This sub-committee allocates heritage categories to structures the subject of proposals - mostly for demolition or removal by the NSW State Rail Authority.

The third approach has been to survey specific sites or types of sites when changes are proposed. The SRA have undertaken studies to assess the significance of workshops, goods sheds, and other components of the system which are likely to become or are becoming redundant. They have also made studies of major components undergoing change, such as Central Railway and Eveleigh Railway workshops.
The fourth approach is comprehensive survey; in which historical research is undertaken beforehand and the sites are assessed on the basis of many criteria - with intactness being a major criterion.

Each of these approaches has been used in NSW, but - as one might expect - they do not cover the whole of the state, either individually or together.

Obviously it is desirable for survey work to be comprehensive and for research to be undertaken beforehand. However, if one accepts the value of the system as a whole and each of the components within it, why then is it necessary to compile an inventory? Surely it would be possible to integrate heritage concerns within the total management of the railway system, so that decisions about property always took heritage values into account? Well, yes - it is possible, and desirable; but the system is undergoing major change, and much property is to become surplus.

The identification of stations and other features is needed because change is occurring fast and it is difficult for a society or organisation to change its approach, when its natural mode (like many other organisations) is to regard heritage as a burden, to be minimised or at least contained. With this approach it is necessary to have a select list of places that are exceptions to the general practice. The other, and major benefit, of an inventory is that it can be used to maintain consistency in approach, and it is available to all the people who might be concerned or interested. It provides a focus, or yardstick, and it provides accountability.

The history and importance of the NSW Railways has been recognised in several scholarly works published recently and in theses about the history and architecture of the NSW railways. A statement of significance has also been prepared as part of a conservation policy for the SRA. The overview is in some ways easy; but assessing individual stations, and differentiating between them - 'between shades of grey' - is not.

The preparation of a computer data base is an essential component of any inventory for a railway system in Australia.

Natural Trust Railway Survey

Apart from National Trust listings, which have occurred continuously from the late 1950s, there have been two major projects for listing railway property of heritage value. In the mid 1980s the National Trust applied for National Estate and Heritage Council funding to undertake a study of the NSW railways. Stuart Sharp, an employee of the State Rail Authority, compiled "A Survey of Railway Structures" whilst on long service leave. This survey identified all the major components of railway stations and other facilities - stations, gangers huts, parcel offices, residences, roundhouses, signal boxes etc. etc., and for each of these components he prepared a typology of those that were planned and those that were extant, together with copies of standard or typical plans etc.

At the same time Stuart compiled information about with features occurred at each station and other railway facilities - as far as was practicable without field survey. This study has provided two massive resources: the typology of railway structures: and three volumes of forms, one for each station or site, with the components identified and cross-referenced to the typology (examples attached). This work was essentially systematic and based upon the material available within the SRA and within Mr Sharp's own collection. Part of the intention in compiling this resources was to provide the basis for identifying places of heritage value, through sampling. Others knowledgeable about the system have recognised inaccuracies and additions that could be made, but in everyone's assessment it is a major achievement, and has been added to with later work by both Paul Davies and myself.
Stuart Sharp’s survey of structures was followed by field work undertaken by Paul Davies - an architect whose thesis was on the history of NSW railway architecture. Paul created a database including every one of the 1500 stations within the NSW railway system. Of these, approximately 47% have been demolished (with the exception of the platform structures), and Paul surveyed approximately half of the remaining stations and prepared draft listings proposals for the National Trust’s Industrial Archaeology Committee. As part of his field survey, Paul checked Stuart Sharp’s data sheets for each location, noting additional components and demolitions.

Both Stuart Sharp’s and Paul Davies’ work was ambitious and optimistic. Like a lot of other heritage work, it was difficult to predict how much time would be needed to collect information and to undertake fieldwork. And as many of us have experienced, a day in the field can produce several days in the office! The consequence is that Paul has yet to complete the inventory forms for many of the stations which he has identified as being significant; and the National Trust has just received advice that funds will be provided to complete this work and to survey some of the lines that were not able to be included in Paul’s field survey. The Trust is working out what can be done for the money available. Given the rate of change in NSW railways, the difficulties of getting up to date information without field survey, unless the SRA contributes itself to the costs of survey, it is likely that inventory survey will be a continuous process in NSW - like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge!

The survey work to be undertaken with the present funding will create a database adapted from the previous work. Data will be collected for each station and entered on a portable computer, on site, with work to be done later kept to a minimum. Criteria related to the statement of significance (and the requirements of the AHC and NSW Heritage Council) will be developed.

**SRA heritage conservation policy and S.170 Register**

Another railway heritage project was undertaken in 1990-91. It comprised two small projects: the preparation of a heritage conservation policy for the State Rail Authority and the compilation of a register from all the various lists and registers (including the work of the Railway Heritage Committee) but without undertaking any field work. The projects were undertaken together, each providing information for the other, and were funded jointly by the Heritage Council of NSW and the State Rail Authority ($12,500 each).

Under S.170 of the NSW Heritage Act, government instrumentalities are required to compile a register of their property of heritage value that is the subject of conservation instruments, or that is of similar heritage value. Instrumentalities have been slow in getting started, but these registers are a major step forward in the recognition of heritage responsibilities.

From all the different inventory processes, almost a thousand items have been identified as significant, but because of overlap it is not possible to give precise numbers. The Register includes 132 bridges and a greater number of stations. The information about listings, including the considerations of the sub committee of the Railway Heritage committee - which assess significance for all structures the subject of proposals for change (including demolition and removal), was noted on the Survey of Structures and the forms for each station and site. From this one can see that the older station buildings are well appreciated, but that there are many types of structures that are not represented on lists. Changes to the system have made many of these ‘common buildings’ redundant and they are now at risk.

As part of the register project, information was collected from local government authorities about railway sites recognised as being of heritage value. Analysis of this information revealed that when local heritage surveys are undertaken, almost every station and railway site will be included in the heritage inventory. This of course is irrespective of any comparative analysis of architecture, building types or any other factor. Thus, rationales about sampling - whilst appealing to the person
looking at the system as a whole - are not valid at a local level. For the state or regional organisation, comparisons/sampling might have a valid basis when other factors are taken into account, such as the appropriate use of funds, or the ability to use the facilities, and the potential of others to re-use redundant property.

Inventories are not finite

There is, I believe, a light burning in the minds of some administrators and perhaps some in the SRA, that if only we could develop some criteria, and stick to them, then we could prepare a once-and-for-all inventory. There is a genuine desire to tidy up heritage and put it in its place, and perhaps the Railway Heritage is not in itself a finite or unchanging commodity. So, in times when the system itself is changing, the significance of the component parts is also changing - and generally becoming more significant.

There are therefore dangers in attempting to prepare a finite list. If only the most intact components are chosen for an inventory - such as the Homebush station - then, if any of the chosen few cannot be kept for whatever reason (such as a fire), the aspects of heritage which it represents might be lost. The second or third best examples might by then have been destroyed.

[Railways are a subject that lends itself to heritage semantics or gymnastics - 'sports' that rarely act for the benefit of conservation.]

If one accepts the value of the railways as a system, and the value of railways as a part of local histories, then preparing an inventory becomes an exercise in collecting information, bearing in mind the nature of the decisions to be made about the future of each component. That information needs to be suitable for making management decisions, for example the need to prepare a detailed conservation plan. It should not be confined to buildings and other structures, although it may need to focus on these in the first instance. Moveable components should also be included: signs, seats, weighing machines and trolleys.

The value of station complexes

The approach to listing adopted by Paul Davies, and also considered appropriate at the workshop held as part of the policy development, was that station groups which retain the majority of their components, and which demonstrated the system, were the most appropriate to include on registers. But it was also recognised at the workshop that other sites should not automatically be regarded as in significant; they should not be subject to demolition or removal. Indeed, some people thought that in remote locations, if a new owner could not be found, it might be better to allow the buildings and other features to remain and slowly decay, rather than have all evidence removed. These are difficult questions. Many people find neglect abhorrent and would prefer things to be 'tidied up'.

I believe it would be practicable to devise, through workshop discussion, a series of management responses and procedures appropriate for typical situations. This would include the process for finding a use for redundant buildings (already in place) and the manner in which redundant property should be left (when the site is no longer in use) and managed. These policy guidelines would include consideration of matters such as station platforms and fencing - do they need to be removed from closed lines; probably not. Of course all these matters have been problems for many years.

Some general advice about inventories for railways

An inventory should follow the major stages accepted as part of heritage studies, namely:
- the compilation of historical material: information about the history of the development of the railway; information about the railways as a system, and the status of the components within it; the role and status of individual stations and sites; and about the railway technology and operation. An outline typology should be prepared. As much as possible should be collected immediately onto a commuter data base;

- the preparation of draft criteria for assessment, and an inventory form;

- comprehensive field work, preceded by a pilot study to test the materials and their operation and to estimate the resources needed for the full survey; at each station (and other sites) all the components should be noted using a standard form; and a series of photographs taken. It is important to assess the context of the station - its relationship with the settlement and its prominence in the landscape; and

- analysis of information and compilation of an inventory.

If it's not possible to survey the whole system at once (and given the scale of railway systems in Australia, a staged project may be very appropriate), give first priority to:

- establishing a data base with the potential to be comprehensive both in relation to the types of property that are included, (eg, including machinery and other movable objects) and in the extent of the system it covers.
- preparing an overall history from existing sources
- undertaking a pilot survey project - preferably using notebook or laptop computers - to test the inventory forms and the criteria.

Remnant bushland in railway reserves

Another aspect of the significance of the railways is the likely presence of remnant bushland. In many areas reserves for railway lines went through undeveloped area, and as strips of land without development vegetation has remained (or in some instances has been able to regenerate). In Victoria, the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (now amalgamated with other departments) prepared a Railway Reserves Vegetation Management Plan. All the lines were surveyed; sites with 'endangered/vulnerable species near to extinction', and sites with 'relic examples of plant communities of preservation status very poor to non existent' were identified, a total of 300 sites, with a total length of 1102.8 kms. Fencing and signposting of these sites is now complete. The total cost of the fencing was $100,000, a very modest amount.

Remnant bushland will occur in all railway systems, and is likely to be valuable for sustaining wildlife and habitats. Where lines have been closed to traffic, it is likely that present fencing will deteriorate or be removed and put these areas at risk. Action similar to that undertaken in Victoria is appropriate for every railway system.

The cost of conservation

The making of an inventory presupposes that some places are more valuable than others. For many people it also supposes that heritage conservation is a burden, practically, and most of all, financially. There is however no substantive material to support this approach - or indeed to support my own view that heritage conservation is not expensive. As a society we prefer to maintain our somewhat polarized positions free from the burden of information.

It should be acknowledged that railway structures are not different from others. IF they are neglected and not adequately maintained, the cost of conservation might be greater than repairs which do not respect the historic fabric. But the community now expects a high standard. Unsightly work such as the fibro accretions of the post-World War II period are not considered appropriate in the 1990s.
But it is also true that conserving the historic fabric may cost less than undertaking the major modern changes that are being proposed for most NSW stations. It is also true that railways in Australia have been no exception to the phenomena of over-conservation - ie, where more work than was necessary has been done, or where new buildings have needlessly incorporated reproduction details.

It is clear that these decisions are not based on the cost of conservation but on what is considered appropriate in each circumstance, and there are clearly a variety of views on this subject.

Many people might find the "upgrading" undertaken by CityRail mentioned earlier as needlessly expensive in its replacement of old and durable features by new fittings.

In mentioning these phenomena, I’m seeking to highlight that there’s an absence of information about the costs of conservation.

Integration of heritage issues into management

To understanding the issues concerning the conservation of the heritage of the NSW Railways, it is necessary to understand the extent of places (stations) that are likely to be of heritage value and to also understand the changing operation and needs of the State Rail Authority. Properties of heritage value form a significant proportion of the property that will remain in use by the SRA. In the country areas virtually every stopping place is significant. This is not surprising given that the only station buildings which the SRA will require for passenger services are those in large towns. Similarly, more than a third of the stations which might be manned by SRA in order to provide freight services (where there is no passenger services) are of heritage value; and, when further survey work is undertaken that number will increase.

In the CityRail area it is also likely that about a third of the property is of heritage significance, and on some lines, such as the south coast line, virtually every station is of significance. Further survey work is urgently needed to identify all the stations of significance so that heritage value can be adequately taken into account in the current program of major works.

During the research for the project several people drew attention to the general management ‘philosophy’ that the SRA were running a railway, with the implied conclusion that conservation of heritage assets had no part in such an objective. However, ‘running a railway’ is only part of the operation, the SRA are also undertaking a very capital intensive works program in the CityRail network. The works being undertaken are (in many cases) much more expensive that the retention of the existing buildings.

The fact that a major part of SRA property is of heritage significance should not be seen as a handicap, but as an asset. The architectural character of the existing buildings provide a readily identifiable image for the SRA; image that could be promoted rather than obscured by modern works. To provide for changes in passenger needs it is necessary to make changes, particularly to provide an improved connection with bus transport; but such changes could readily be designed to be compatible with the existing structures. This does not mean that the facilities should be old fashioned, or reproduction, but rather that care should be taken with design. Existing fittings - such as seats - may be able to be retained rather than replaced with new fittings.

The process of compiling an inventory has the potential to provide data suitable for making management decisions. But unless there are accepted mechanisms and procedures for heritage to be taken into account, backed with appropriate resources, then the inventory will be avoided or disregarded.
The SRA has established some mechanisms for requiring heritage to be taken into account, but with major restructuring in recent years, many people are now unfamiliar with them, and heritage concerns are sometimes recognised too late to be properly taken into account.

Management of redundant property

In management, it is desirable to develop an approach that allows information about significance to be available; and that is conservative, i.e., that allows which retain heritage values to be considered.

At the workshop held as part of the conservation plan project, there was unanimous concern about the policy of “no maintenance” that has applied in NSW (and also I believe in Victoria, but not in Queensland, where the system largely remains in use and is in good condition). Under this policy, redundant buildings are not maintained irrespective of their future potential value, either to the SRA or other possible occupants. Attempts are made to minimise vandalism, but demolition is usually the ultimate end, and the preferred management solution.

The policy is not peculiar to the railways - it is also practised by other engineering-dominated organisations, such as mining companies. Again, I’ve never seen or heard of any financial comparative assessment to support or oppose such practices. However, there has been community opposition - with some communities battling to save their stations, and many not even trying because the railways are seen as immovable or intractable. Unfortunately, opportunities to find suitable tenants or owners may have been lost because of the deterioration or vandalism, and local authorities do not have the funds to repair the structures.

If the railway authority has no use for a place, it should offer it to others for lease with conditions or as freehold. Obviously there are important safety questions that need consideration - there has been a long-standing concern about the risks of non-railway occupation of buildings near railway lines. But how does two trains a day compare with the risks of living alongside a busy highway, such as Parramatta Road? Surely there is some way of accommodating these risks?

In offering property for a non-railway use, community use should be given a higher priority, irrespective of the financial return. It is important also not just to sell off the most saleable property - such as houses - without consideration for other buildings in the complex.

Re-using a railway station is not easy. Station buildings often comprise a row of unconnected rooms with access from a platform. They are not readily suited to other uses, without inserting connecting doors or making additions. So, to retain a complex comprising a station, a stationmaster's house and say, goods shed, it would be preferable to offer it first as a group, rather than selling the house first and then offering the others. If the houses are sold first, it may be extremely difficult to find satisfactory uses for the station. A small business might well be able to occupy a station and gain added security with one of its employees living in the stationmaster's residence.

In offering properties for sale or lease, it is desirable to include:
- information about that place and its history, including copies of original drawings, plus
- general information about the railway and guidelines for the conservation of railway buildings.

Many property and buildings that are now redundant cannot be kept - except perhaps the shell of the buildings. Servicing and repair is concentrated in a small number of places and large amounts of machinery is now redundant. Records are being made of the more important places, but perhaps the SRA could arrange tours of some of the major facilities - such as those at Junee and Werris Creek, so that people could see them and appreciate their significance, for the last time. Say good bye with a flourish!
Management of heritage property remaining in SRA use

It is clear that in NSW all the station complexes in country areas that will remain in SRA use are likely to be of heritage value; and as operating stations, they are likely to acquire significance by virtue of that status.

Ideally, conservation plans should be prepared for each station listed on an inventory; but given the number of stations, and the urgent need for advice, general conservation guidelines, together with specific guidelines for each station may be adequate to guide decisions about works. It is also desirable that architects engaged to prepare plans for works should have prior conservation experience.

Follow the principles of the Burra Charter

In conserving railway property follow the principles and process of the Burra Charter. Avoid imitation where there is no evidence, and be careful about details for new work. Often railways had their own ways of making things, based on the readily available components. Fences, for example, are often made of rail track - as in Bathurst and Glen Innes. If such special details don't exist, don't invent them or copy them from elsewhere; but similarly, don't introduce reproduction period fences - just because they are commonly associated with old buildings. A simple modern fence is preferable.

Moveable property

Ideally, the furniture and fittings should remain with the property. Although it may be tempting for the railway authority to make money and kudos by selling to collectors, and prudent to clear away the furniture before people pinch it. Surely, it would be possible to create a repository with a long term view to ensuring that they will be available for their own stations and for people who wish to conserve property, or for return to the site of their use. This will take considerable commitment, but not much more than the commitment to establish the shop selling redundant paraphernalia. Perhaps moveable property is another role for the Railway Heritage Trust?

Using our common experience

What can we, as a group of people concerned about railway heritage, do to promote our concerns and to help one another? Here are a few suggestions.

1. Preparation of discussion paper about railway heritage and issues for general distribution (perhaps prepared from this conference). This paper might be suitable for inclusion in National Trust journal or other heritage newsletter and also in a more popular form in other magazines.

2. Combined lobbying for concurrent funding for projects via the AHC and State heritage organisations. Such projects might concentrate on common issues and concerns - for example, it may be appropriate to encourage a study of railway workshops across Australia, and to consider the practical ways and means of retaining some of the equipment. Sample guideline documents could be prepared providing advice about say, the re-use of railway buildings, using information from one state, but in such a way that they are applicable to other areas also.

3. An illustrated booklet about the significance of railways, linking history with sites, and with lots of examples, including all the components of the system from the track, the station, to the machinery.
4. Exchanging information, for example, about the re-use of redundant railway buildings.

5. Holding another seminar, say, in two to three years.

Attachment:


TYPE: FIRST CLASS STATION BUILDINGS
COVERAGE: All extant examples.
EXAMPLES PLANNED: 24
EXAMPLES EXTANT: 19
COMMON FEATURE OF TYPE: See below
FEATURES:

1. ROOFSCAPE: hip & valley; complicated pattern
2. FLOOR PLAN: more than 6 rooms in main structure; centre access, overall symmetry.
3. AWNING SUPPORT: timber or metal posts.

EXAMPLES.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>MATERIAL</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>Bathurst No. 1</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2/3/1875</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cootamundra No. 1</td>
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<td>Dubbo</td>
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<td>Glen Innes</td>
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<td>Maitland No. 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young</td>
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NOTE: Bibliography and all Attachments accompany the paper in Conference Booklet - available at SRA.