Melbourne Docklands: workaday yet relentlessly romantic

Peter Lovell

Abstract
When first defined in the 1980s Melbourne’s Dockland included a vast area of railway goods yards, a two kilometre stretch of the Yarra River extending from Spencer Street to the west, a former gas works site and the expansive Victoria Dock. It was an area which contained fragments of shipping and mercantile activity which dated from first settlement to the advent of containerisation in the late 1960s. Transformed, it is now an area which is increasingly a new place where there is significant loss of a sense of age and history. New Docklands delivers little that communicates its past; the heritage which is left is contained in fragments, a few buildings and in the dock and the basin.

The journey is one which reflects the ebb and flow of such massive projects and the difficulty of retaining a subtle and sometimes ephemeral heritage in place.

Introduction
Melbourne’s Dockland redevelopment covers some 220 hectares, taking in a combined land and water area which is as large as the existing central city. When first defined as such in the 1980s it included a vast area of railway goods yards, a two kilometre stretch of the Yarra River extending from Spencer Street to the west, a former gas works site and the expansive Victoria Dock. It was an area which contained fragments of shipping and mercantile activity which dated from first settlement to the advent of containerisation in the late 1960s. Transformed, it is now an area which is increasingly a new place; devoid of a sense of the past, in which heritage resides in isolated buildings located in an increasingly alien setting. Still growing and already recognised as an extraordinary urban design achievement in a national and international context, could the heritage outcome have been different?

Heritage identification and appraisal
In May 1990 the Committee for Melbourne produced an elaborate publication called Melbourne Docklands. The document outlined a vision for a site of some 350 hectares located immediately to the west of Melbourne’s central activity district. While projects and site planning strategies were conceptual, they embraced the huge potential of the area focussing on two key issues – ‘the demand for urban infrastructure and export performance’ (Committee for Melbourne 1990: 4). The infrastructure component included housing at all levels combined with associated retail and recreation facilities, while the focus of export performance was on new commercial and institutional development. In the immediate area around Victoria Dock, the centrepiece of the Docklands area, four character areas were identified: central city; transition; waterfront; and education and research. The potential of each area was explored and proposals developed.

In its concluding pages the publication’s authors noted:

Melbourne’s Docklands offers a unique opportunity. It must also be seen as a trust. There is need to ensure that development makes a major contribution not just to Melbourne and Victoria, but also to Australia. The Docklands area is a place of international potential (Committee for Melbourne 1990: 51).

An outcome of the Committee for Melbourne report was the establishment in 1990 of the Docklands Task Force which ultimately lead to the formation of the Docklands Authority under the provisions of the Docklands Authority Act 1991.

The Task Force also produced a report, Melbourne Docklands Strategic Options, which addressed, among many issues, heritage and conservation. Places noted in the report as being of heritage significance included only two actually located within what became the Docklands area – Queens Warehouse and Railway Goods Shed No 2. Both were already included on heritage registers; the former on the Register of Government Buildings, and the latter on the Victorian Register of Historic Buildings (Docklands Task Force 1991a: 60). Not identified, however, was Victoria Dock itself and any of the related good sheds and wharf buildings. As with the Committee for Melbourne report a range of uses were identified for the area including residential, industrial, mixed use, retail and wholesaling.

The Docklands Task Force produced its Draft Strategy for Redevelopment in November 1991. Informed by the 1991 Docklands Heritage Study: Final Draft, the report, for the first time seriously explored the heritage issues. It was now recognised that the Docklands contained significant heritage which in the words of the report was ‘a strategic issue because it can have a significant impact on shaping urban design’ (Docklands Task Force 1991b: 94). In noting the views of the Historic Buildings Council and the National Trust of Australia (Vic) in relation to the ‘industrial heritage’ of the area the report

Figure 1: Victoria Dock c 1930s showing the lines of cargo sheds lining the wharf and Central Pier. Source: Reproduced in Ruhen, Olaf, Port of Melbourne 1835-1976, Cassell Australia, 1976.
stated: ‘Certainly it is the view of these groups that Docklands is a special place in which recognition of the maritime and rail history should be incorporated in future development expertly and with integrity’ (Docklands Task Force 1991b: 94). The report clearly recognised the potential clash between heritage and development and noted the need to ensure that ‘isolated monuments to the past are not retained for the sake of preservation and in an alien context’ (Docklands Task Force 1991b: 95).

The heritage studies

The 1991 heritage study had been jointly commissioned by the Docklands Task Force and the then Historic Buildings Council, now the Heritage Council of Victoria. As reflected in the 1992 Annual Report of the newly formed Docklands Authority the study was not greeted with universal approbation or support. In submitting his report to the then Minister for Arts and Major Projects the Chairperson of the Authority noted in his covering letter that:

> Considerable progress has also been made in assessing the implications of the possible application of the Historic Buildings Act to a large number of built elements within the south-east corner of Docklands. The Historic Buildings Council and the Docklands Task Force has sponsored a report that purported to identify a large number of elements within Docklands worthy of preservation under the Historic Buildings Act. The Docklands Authority has prepared a very strong case for submission to the Historic Buildings Council objecting to the classification of certain buildings of minimum historic value which, if retained, would hinder proper development of the Docklands (Docklands Authority 1992: 2-3).

Within the body of the Annual Report it was noted that the Authority had sought independent advice and that this advice ‘cast serious doubt on the validity of the some of the work previously undertaken’ (Docklands Authority 1992: 17). The report identified quite clearly the potential for heritage to inhibit the redevelopment of Docklands as identified as the Authority’s primary objective. While acknowledging that ‘some elements are worthy of preservation’, the report clearly restated that development was the principal driver for the future of the place.

The purposes of the 1991 heritage study were:
- to identify, evaluate and document post-contact buildings, areas or other places in the study area which are of cultural significance. And to place them within the context of the history of Victoria; and
- to make recommendations for the conservation and management of identified places of cultural significance (Historic Buildings Council & Docklands Task Force 1991: no pagination).

Forty-eight individual sites were identified within the study area. Eighteen of these sites were recommended for inclusion on the Victorian Historic Buildings Register and 36 were recommended for planning scheme protection. Of these sites 12 were already on or were subsequently added to the Register. Those 12 were also covered by related planning scheme protection. The remaining 24 sites recommended for planning scheme protection remained unprotected and have now largely been demolished. Of the 12 sites identified for registration those within the Victoria Dock area comprise the dock itself and berths (with cargo sheds) 8, 9, 14, 15 and 19-21. Of these structures the dock remains, albeit in a modified form, the cargo sheds at berths 8 and 15 have been dismantled and removed from the site, the future of the sheds at berths 9 and 14 on Central Pier remains uncertain and the sheds at berths 19-21 have been or are to be demolished.

In the years following the 1991 heritage study addressing heritage issues appears to have been a relatively low priority for the Authority which was necessarily focussed on the development of an overall docklands plan. Heritage related activities included the relocation of the former Exhibition Goods Shed from Batmans Hill to Kilmore, north-west of Melbourne, and the progressive demolition of minor structures. Of considerably greater impact on heritage was the decision made in 1992 to extend Collins Street to the Docklands via an overpass over the railway yards. This decision caused considerable alarm and opposition from the Victorian National Trust.

In responding in early 1992 to the Task Force’s latest ‘Draft Strategy for Redevelopment’ the National Trust invited ‘prominent architects, planners, urban designers and historians’ to a workshop. Among the many concerns which the Trust’s panel addressed was the fact that the extension of Collins Street, one of Melbourne’s principal central city streets, would involve the demolition of part of one of the most important buildings in the area, Goods Shed No. 2. Some time later their concern over partial demolition for a road extension was to be well surpassed by a new proposal that the world’s
tallest building be constructed, placed centrally over and subsuming most of the goods shed. Notwithstanding the issuing of a permit by Heritage Victoria, the tower proposal did not eventuate, but the Collins Street extension did, and one of Melbourne’s most important industrial buildings is now bisected by an elevated roadway.

In 1996 the Docklands Authority commissioned a second heritage study. This study followed the identification of seven development precincts which were to be put out to the market place for expressions of interest. In the introduction to the study the authors noted that the urban design guidelines released by the authority in December 1995 had identified heritage as an important consideration in future development and one which ‘creates both the image and future identity for development of the Docklands’ (McDougall & Vines 1997: 1). The report noted the urgent need to ‘resolve the issue of heritage status of the buildings within the study area … given that on 31 May 1996, written expressions of interest were sought from developers…for purchase and development of this land’ (McDougall & Vines 1997: 1).

The 1997 study made a number of recommendations which mirrored those of the 1991 heritage study, namely that cargo sheds at berths 8, 15, 20, 21 and 24 should be considered for and/or added to the Victorian Heritage Register and that conservation management plans should be prepared. In addition it recommended that a conservation management plan should be prepared for Goods Shed No. 2, which was already on the Heritage Register. The study recommendations also included guidelines for the height of buildings adjacent to heritage buildings – no more than one storey or 4 m higher.

On ‘Public Space Details’ the 1997 study also made a number of recommendations. In particular the recovery and reuse of bluestone pitchers for paving, the installation of wharf barriers and/or lowering of wharfs to accommodate pedestrian use, the retention of water structures (timber mooring piles) and the reuse of traditional light fittings as relevant to the particular period with which they were associated. (McDougall & Vines 1997: 5-6)

Other recommendations included the retention of the shape of Victoria Dock, investigation of the original wharf structure with a preference for retention, the monitoring of identified archaeological sites and the development of an interpretation plan. A related recommendation was the linking of any public art program with the cultural history of the site.

The report included a statement of cultural significance as follows:

The Docklands area as a whole and its various components:
- Demonstrate the growth of Victoria’s trade links with the rest of the world particularly in the period of the early twentieth century.
- Demonstrate the importance of the use of sea and rail transport systems in the development of the economy of colonial and post-Federation Victoria.
- Contain the Victoria Dock, the second largest single dock in the world at the time of its construction in 1892 and the first large artificial dock basin in Australia.
- Has close associations with a wide range of individuals and groups of workers who planned, designed, built and worked in the area. (McDougall & Vines 1997: 10)

The last point is of interest in that it was the first time that a study had recognised the social historical and contextual value of the place. While this was not related to any single element it
Street extension and from the Docklands Stadium. The action reflected one of the critical areas of heritage tension in the project, the imperative to create an entirely new urban form responsive to the Docklands vision. The vision was one which was constantly presented in the elaborate graphics and imagery contained in many of the Authority’s publications of the later 1990s and early 2000s.

In 2000 heritage approval was finally granted for the removal of sheds 8 and 15 on condition that another shed, shed 9 on Central Pier would be reconstructed as originally completed in 1913-16 using parts from the removed sheds. The approval was issued under the permit exemption, albeit it was not in the context of an approved development plan. The works also included the removal of Cowper Street, one of the few part pitched roads left in the precinct.

Figure 4: Berth 8, with the Docklands Stadium behind. The location of the former Cargo Shed 8, 2006. Photo: Peter Lovell.

Urban design v heritage

The imperative to transform the appearance of Docklands has always been a key objective of the project and one which has resulted in an award for design excellence (VicUrban 2005: 1). Equally the process is one which has seen the removal of the old urban form and replacement by the new. It is a process in which the coarseness and worn quality of an evolved fabric has been replaced by a hard self-conscious urban graphic of bright colours, exotic trees, manipulated space and urban art. There is little which is subtle about the new Docklands and nothing, other than the obvious and monumental, which reflects its past. Could it have been approached differently?

The most significant loss is the loss of any sense that this is a place of some age and history. The vision of the Dock is increasingly that it is a place which was built yesterday rather than a century ago. The prompts which might normally reference age have been removed. The settings of the buildings which remain have been transformed – rendering their presence increasingly uncomfortable. There is fundamental failure to deliver any sense of connectedness between the surviving heritage structures. Rather they stand as largely decaying relics of a past with little sense of purpose or no ability to understand how they functioned or related.

The transformation of the ground plane has been wholesale. The narrow strip of wharf which separated the wharf sheds from the water’s edge has been converted to the prescribed pedestrian promenade; relvelled so that the pedestrian can relate more closely to the water. Other than on Central Pier the split level between the road and elevated wharf sheds has been removed. The textures of pitched bluestone, timber and bitumen have been replaced with coloured paving, trees and street furniture. While perhaps to be applauded from a contemporary urban design perspective the new Docklands delivers little which communicates its past.

Losing grip – the heritage of the ephemeral

With the progressive abandonment of the Docklands area as an active port the place increasingly gained an aura of decay. The relationship between sites, buildings, rail lines and seemingly ephemeral objects, which in many ways relied on activity and movement, rapidly dissolved as their purpose and functionality disappeared. While the 1991 heritage study addressed the remnant fabric, it did not address the intangible qualities of the place and the manner in which the heritage values were dependant upon the associated port activities and people.

Unlike many other docks which have been the subject of active renewal and rebirthing, Melbourne’s Docklands long ago lost any coherent and physically dominant built form. There are no majestic finger wharfs, multilevel warehouses, prominent customs house or picturesque godowns. It was essentially a flat place in which the business of the docks occurred in unspectacular sheds set in ribbon format following the edge of the wharf. Single storey, pitched roofed with gable ends these buildings were impressive not because of their scale or heroic maritime form but for their repeated simplicity and sheer number. Many had vanished well before the Docklands Authority took over, a few replaced with utilitarian structures of the post war years. There was little that was architecturally glamorous about the place, but much that conveyed a sense of history and mercantile activity.

By 1991 the built heritage of Docklands was already greatly diminished from that which existed in the heyday of the pre-containerisation period. The surviving wharf sheds had long ago ceased to function for shipping purposes and were either abandoned or occupied by a range of alternative uses; ships chandlers, furniture makers, artists and the like. The gas works had long gone and pleasure craft largely occupied the berths along the river. While occasional cargo vessels still docked and local interstate traders berthed at a roll-on roll-off facility the place was increasingly deserted and desolate.

The core heritage fabric however which did survive was that located around Central Pier, the finger wharf located in the centre of the dock. The Central Pier precinct retained its original wharf sheds, sheds 8 and 15, which flanked the entry to the pier, and on the pier a range of modified sheds which reflected the evolving shed form as cargo handling and craneage technology had changed over the decades. In many ways this was the last intact vestige of the operating dock of the early twentieth century. Split roadways, timber wharfs, cobbled roadways, and a roughness generated a real sense of the dock as a working place. While traditional dock activities had ceased, this cargo shed precinct still retained a coherent built form which strongly conveyed the heritage story.

The removal of the sheds at berths 8 and 15 to create the new promenade and to open up views to the water is possibly the most dramatic of actions which have fractured the heritage
story at Docklands. These sheds were pivotal in holding the sense and logic of Central Pier as an operating dock. The Hausmanesque action of sweeping aside the old may have been a necessary part of the vision but it is an action which has dealt the heritage of the place a fatal blow.

Conclusion

The Historic Buildings Council’s 1991 heritage study assessment of Victoria Dock concluded with a quote about another great dock, Surrey Docks:

An engineer called McConnichie, who was concerned with a nineteenth-century improvement to the Surrey Docks, declared that he was ‘not there to build monuments, but to use materials and construction that would produce dividends’. Small wonder then that the passing of the docks leaves no great wealth of beautiful buildings …. It is the shape and layout of the docks, the stone furniture of their quays, ‘the reservoir of light’ they offer to the sky that appeal to the eye whether they are still in use or shut down. Acres of open space clinging to the Thames tideway they assert their atmosphere, workaday yet relentlessly romantic (Historic Buildings Council & Docklands Task Force 1991: no pagination).

The scale of the Docklands project was such that inevitably heritage was likely to suffer. As often occurs, the focus of the 1991 heritage study was object based, identifying elements of significance, grading them and making recommendations for their recognition, and ideally, protection by way of inclusion on relevant heritage lists. Undertaken when no development had occurred and when the Docklands Authority was formulating its strategy the pressure to see the site as largely unencumbered was great. There was clearly an ability to accept those features which were of obvious heritage significance but far less the features and more ephemeral qualities of place which so fundamentally contributed to the setting.

As indicated in the following table the heritage score card at Docklands, is to date, unimpressive. While the project is only partially complete the active conservation and reuse of heritage buildings, with one or two exceptions, is yet to occur.

| Goods Shed No 2 | Victorian Heritage Register | Bisected by the extension of Collins Street. Sold in two parts. No works undertaken to conserve either part. Heritage Permit issued for the redevelopment of the northern half for commercial/retail use. |
| Retaining Wall | Victorian Heritage Register | Retained intact. Minor intervention to create pedestrian link. |
| Exhibition Goods Shed | Victorian Heritage Register | Relocated to tramways museum in Kilmore. Fully restored/reconstructed on new site. |
| Victoria Dock, Berths 19 to 20 | No heritage protection | Recommended for further appraisal and possible inclusion on the Heritage Register in 1996. To be demolished. |
| Victoria Dock Berths 8 and 15 | Victorian Heritage Register | Dismantled and stored. Parts to be used in reconstruction of the original form of Berth 9 cargo shed on Central Pier |
| Victoria Dock Berths 22 and 24 | No heritage protection | Recommended that one be included on the Victorian Heritage Register. To be demolished. |
| Victoria Dock, Berths 9 and 14 | Victorian Heritage Register | Not recommended for inclusion on the Heritage Register in 1996. Future uncertain. Pressure for major redevelopment of the Central Pier may result in demolition. |
| Lamp standards | No heritage protection | Unknown |
| Dudley Street | No heritage protection | Recommended that alignment be retained in redevelopment in 1996. Remade as new road. |
| Queen’s Warehouse | Victorian Heritage Register | Refurbished as a car museum. |
While Melbourne Docklands may be ‘all about balancing public outcomes with the needs of the private sector investors’ (Docklands Authority 1999: 5), the approach to and treatment of heritage as a public outcome has yet to be evidenced.

To date the development of Docklands has delivered no heritage outcomes within the development area. An interpretation plan has yet to be implemented and the art and sculpture program appears quite removed from any reference to heritage. The history of the place largely has been erased and increasingly there is pressure on the physical fragments which survive. While it can be hoped that the major structures which have been retained will be conserved, there is even doubt in this area.

In the middle of 2006 Melbourne’s The Age newspaper ran a series of articles on the future of Docklands; where it had got to and where it was going. Focussing mostly on the new architecture and urban design it sought out the views of many experts and opinion holders (Millar 2006). As might be expected these were diverse ranging from supportive to condemnatory. In all, however, not a single comment was made on heritage. The series seems to have concluded with a front page editorial and headline – WANTED An icon for Melbourne (The Age 29 July 2006, editorial). While the editorial simply identified that ‘Central Pier has the potential to be this City’s 21st century statement’, the adjacent column was headed ‘Historic dock’s sheds “in the way”’. Quoting the Victorian Chapter president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, ‘they should be sacrificed if it meant a better outcome for the landmark site’. The pressure is still on.

More positively the newly appointed head of VicUrban, the successor to the Docklands Authority and person responsible for the delivery of a solution to Central Pier, recently in an address to the Property Council indicated a sensitivity to the issue of the Central Pier heritage and perhaps by implication that demolition was not high on her list of options.²

The heritage of Docklands which existed in 1991 has now long gone. The city is left with a place which, like the burgeoning cities of Asia, is unrecognisable from 15 years ago. The heritage which is left is contained in individual buildings, in the dock and in the basin, but ‘workaday yet relentlessly romantic’ it is not. Perhaps in another 100 years views will have changed.

Figure 6: Central Pier, Melbourne Docklands 2006. Photo: Peter Lovell.

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