Milling it over: Geelong’s new life in forgotten places

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Abstract

The gradual departure of heavy industry from Geelong over the last 30 years has left a legacy of forgotten places and an urban identity marooned between fading industrial modernism and an uncertain post-modern world. The rigor mortis of heavy manufacturing has been accompanied by rhetoric of despair about the city’s future. Amid planning approaches focusing on the oft-competing ends of city-centre revitalisation and sprawling suburban growth, the defunct spaces of Geelong’s industrial past are providing an unlikely crucible for renewed optimism, borne from grassroots creativity. This flourishing of creative expression in gritty spaces is a meeting of history, heritage and artistic endeavour that presents the palimpsest of the city writ large; creating unexpected connections between people and places once thought lost in the ethereal whispers of the past. The reinvention of these spaces as sites of and for new makers suggests a need to re-evaluate the significance of industrial heritage by engaging with the perspectives of those actively reinterpreting it. Focusing on the rejuvenation of an abandoned paper mill, this paper explores the recreation of Geelong’s industrial heritage to understand the cultural role of these spaces and how they act as creative incubators, while considering the implications for connections between people, place and creative practice.

Introduction

Founded on the shores of Corio Bay, some 75 km south-west of Melbourne, Geelong is one of many cities grappling with the impacts of de-industrialisation. Job losses and the closure of factories have challenged the city’s economy, social fabric and identity. The exit of heavy industry has raised difficult questions regarding the city’s economic and demographic change, as well as the need to determine a future for many abandoned industrial buildings that permeate the city’s imagery and parts of its urban fabric. These oft-abandoned places continue to carry Geelong’s rich history as a city of makers, inventors and fabricators. While they continue to express the ambitions and work practices of days gone by, they are also inspiring new types of post-industrial maker culture. In order to explore the creative potential of this industrial heritage and the appeal of grime as part of its historic significance, this paper looks at the Fyansford Paper Mills, a six-hectare site on Geelong’s outskirts that is currently undergoing adaptive reuse through a grass-roots process of creative material and social conservation. This space, while one of a number of creative hubs forming in former industrial buildings, is notable for the craftsman-like approach to its regeneration that gives a nod to the building’s history and the community of makers that has been consciously developed around it. We consider how the reinvention of this space connects with Geelong’s maker-city identity, not simply by reusing industrial sites, but by redefining these places via a process of creative conservation driven by grassroots desires to continue a social tradition of ‘making’. In this way, the paper
aligns itself with the central tenet of Critical Heritage Studies (Harrison 2012; Smith 2006) in that it re-frames heritage as a dynamic socio-cultural process, where places are subject to a layering of meaning, as opposed to more conservative notions of heritage where the fabric exists in temporal stasis. The process of creative conservation conducted at the Fyansford Paper Mills reveals the potential for community practices to reveal and form alternative, previously unacknowledged readings of a place’s heritage significance. This article considers how this process can both draw on and further form the significance of a heritage place. It also studies how the material artefact of the built fabric of industrial heritage is a catalyst for connection and creativity; both through its own re-interpretation and restoration, and as a setting for new forms of post-industrial making.

Geelong: A city of makers

Victoria’s second largest city after Melbourne, Geelong’s steady growth through the twentieth century can be attributed to its strategic location at the meeting point of Corio Bay and a highly productive rural hinterland which fuelled the rise of industry (Wynd 1972). From processing or value-adding primary produce to heavier manufacturing, Geelong has always been a city of makers with industrial grit ingrained in its identity.

Geelong was first surveyed in 1838, only three weeks after Melbourne, and quickly became the pivot on which Port Phillip Bay’s commerce turned (Wynd 1972). Despite this early prosperity, Geelong was eclipsed for much of the nineteenth century by Melbourne’s rise as a global administrative centre, and the regional centres of Ballarat and Bendigo that were founded on the wealth of the goldfields with a built legacy to match. However, as gold discoveries dwindled and the gears of industry accelerated into the twentieth century, Geelong’s role as a centre for manufacturing saw it outstrip the goldfields centres. Geelong’s population doubled between 1901 and 1942, growing from 25,943 to 52,408, and by 1970 had doubled again as a result of immigration programs that brought factory workers to the region. Today, the broader Geelong region has a population of 278,929 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

What early Geelong lacked in gold, it made up for in wool, wheat and waterfront. From the 1850s, Geelong became a city of mills producing flour, textiles and paper. A number of early mills were established along the Barwon River south of the fledgling city centre, drawing on its flows to power their operations (Brownhill 1990). While many of these mills focused on wool, reflecting Geelong’s rise from the sheep’s back, the paper mills at Fyansford are among the grandest and most enduring of these structures.

A mill to make a statement

The paper mills complex at Fyansford on the Barwon River, 5 km west of Geelong, stands as a grand gesture to technological innovation of its time. Upon construction in 1878, the Fyansford Paper Mills (also known as the Barwon Paper Mills) were one of the southern hemisphere’s largest and best, with no expense spared in an effort to establish a ‘first-class paper-making factory’ (Brownhill 1990, p. 316). The site is unique: steep, well-positioned to take advantage of both viewlines and river flows, and ideal for a showpiece project. Design work began on the facility in 1874, with the consortium of proprietors keen to make a statement in the building’s sheer materiality and blue-stone solidity that would serve as a symbol of Geelong’s ongoing importance as an industrial centre (Milner 1991).

The mill produced its first sample of paper in August 1878—brown wrapping paper made from old sugar bags and other waste (Brownhill 1990). The mill’s engineering was impressive; machinery imported from England was powered by water drawn from the Barwon River through a solid bluestone race nearly three-quarters of a mile long (Brownhill 1990). The buildings of the mill were equally impressive for their imposing appearance:

The main buildings, several of them two storeys, were all built in coursed bluestone, locally quarried, with brick internal partitions and iron roofs. The walls were generally from 12 to 18 inches (30 to 46 cm) thick and the general appearance of the mill, atop the precipitous northern bank of the river, was that of a fortress. (Milner 1985a: pp. 19-20).
The mill’s towering chimney helped further the sense of Victorian grandeur that reflected the owners’ faith in technological and industrial prowess (Rowe 1991). Despite such investment and ambition, the operational life of the mill was short-lived; the operation never returned its capital investment and the mill only produced paper for less than half a century. The mill was sold multiple times before paper production finally ceased in 1923 (Brownhill 1990). According to Milner (1985a, p. 18), the Fyansford Paper Mills remains the ‘best evidence we now have … of a vanished technology, when paper was made from old rags, old rope, grass and straw’.

In announcing the loss of 100 jobs and the ‘indefinite closure’ of the mill in 1922 due to the loss of a government supply contract and competition from imported product, the Melbourne Argus (15 March 1922) was essentially signalling a narrative that would become familiar during Geelong’s deindustrialisation of later years. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, the mill’s short production life, partly attributable to global trends and its capital-intensive manufacturing process — along with the building’s isolation from major transport networks, has contributed to the preservation of its physical and technological integrity (Milner 1985b: 12).

Come 2017, the mill and its buildings are being progressively reinvented. The acquisition of the site by builder Alex Robins in 2002 after a community campaign to save the mills from the grasp of a container company has brought about a craftsman-like restoration process. Robins’ focus is on careful preservation and traditional construction methods where fine-grained details are combined with a vision that embraces the site’s stories and history of accumulated industrial detritus. Although archival images of the factory in use remain, like many industrial complexes, the machinery that gave the Fyansford Paper Mills its technological significance has now been lost. Nonetheless, the conservation process of the mills is more than simply attending to physical detail: In order to build a community around the building, Robins is carefully building a family of makers. New establishments at the mills include art studios, a bookbinder, fibreglass fabricator, café, winery and gallery, all drawing inspiration from both landscape and building to add their own layers of meaning to the place. Beyond these makers, larger community events are now held onsite, adding more threads to a newly woven tapestry of links between people and place.

Rebirth of a maker spirit

Today, maker culture is more readily associated with entrepreneurship, invention, start-ups and digital culture (Katterfeldt, Zeising & Lund 2013). A synthesis of the craftsmanship of the past with the democratisation of knowledge arising from internet access, maker culture is a hybrid of high and popular culture. As the source of some of Australia’s most important inventions, Geelong’s heritage is entwined with its maker spirit, which has been fluid but always ingrained in the city’s culture. Geelong lays claim to a significant part of the invention of Australian Rules Football, with the game’s first great innovator, Tom Wills, spending much of his life in Geelong (De Moore 2008). In 1854, refrigeration pioneer James Harrison designed, built and patented Australia’s first ice production plant in Geelong (Bruce-Wallace 1966). At the city’s most famous manufacturer, the Ford motoring company, Geelong-based automotive illustrator Lewis Bandt invented the ute in 1932, which became an oft-replicated Australian automotive icon (Townsend 2008). For much of the 20th century, this industrial activity was heavily subsidised, helping to ensure Geelong ‘pumped … as a perfect organ’ (Townsend 2008, p. 194), a symphony of industrial modernity in which the city’s fortunes often paralleled those of its industrial makers and institutions. Economic deregulation, modernisation of industrial processes and free trade from the 1970s onward have posed an existential threat to Geelong’s manufacturing tradition, undermining the region’s identity and starting a process of change. Over the 1990s the waterfront of Geelong was transformed from a maritime and industrial precinct into a local and tourist destination in an effort to both shift and draw from the city’s distinctive character. Yet the effects and narratives of deindustrialisation persisted beyond such efforts. Coinciding with announcements of the closure of Ford’s automotive plant and the Alcoa aluminium smelter, community outrage was sparked in 2014 when Geelong was represented in a provocative promotional video as a city of ‘zombies’ bereft of life (Gray & Novacevski 2015).
This is the setting in which the reinvention of the Fyansford Paper Mills emerges. As Geelong explores the concept of creativity to reinvent its economy and identity (City of Greater Geelong, 2017), significant questions emerge around the role of ‘making’ in Geelong and the material and cultural value of the city’s industrial heritage. These buildings have left a powerful imprint on Geelong’s urban landscape, a legacy that remains gritty and steadfast. Many of Geelong’s mills and factories were built of bluestone or a characteristic red brick, with materiality, durability and solidity that defined a growing engine of production and reflected the ambition of a nascent Victorian industrial modernity. While the behemoths of industry and the hum of Geelong’s mills and factories has faded to silence, their built legacy remains. Are these sites, such as the Fyansford Paper Mills, simply architecture in the form of industrial spolia? Are their historic narratives simply to be revealed as relics juxtaposed with contemporary activity? Or is something different occurring? Seen through the lens of emerging theory of ‘experimental preservation’, which draws on critical heritage to inform practice, might this industrial heritage be providing a creative wellspring to recast Geelong’s identity as a post-industrial maker city?

**Industrial heritage as a site of creative conservation**

The recognition of the cultural significance of industrial heritage sites is growing at local and international levels. This is underscored by the development of specialist advisory bodies such as The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH) in the 1970s and the more recent adoption of legal instruments and best practice guides such as *The Nizhny Tagil Charter for the Industrial Heritage* (*The Nizhny Tagil Charter*) in 2003 and *The Dublin Principles for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage Sites, Structures, Areas and Landscapes* (*The Dublin Principles*) in 2011. These documents serve to define and set out the principles for the conservation of industrial heritage, while TICCIH acts as an expert advisor to ICOMOS. The *Nizhny Tagil Charter* states that:

... the buildings and structures built for industrial activities, the processes and tools used within them and the towns and landscapes in which they are located, along with all their other tangible and intangible manifestations, are of fundamental importance. They should be studied, their history should be taught, their meaning and significance should be probed and made clear for everyone, and the most significant and characteristic examples should be identified, protected and maintained, in accordance with the spirit of the Venice Charter, for the use and benefit of today and of the future. (TICCIH 2003, p. 1)

The Fyansford Paper Mills is not the first example of adaptive reuse of industrial heritage in Geelong. Deakin University’s Waterfront Campus, completed in 1997 is housed within the refurbished Dalgety and Company Limited Woolstores, an industrial building made for storing, handling and marketing wool (*Architecture Australia* 1997). More recently, in 2013, the eastern arm of Little Creatures Brewery was established in the former Valley Worsted Mill (Richardson 2015). In these projects, the patina of times gone has proven a valuable asset that draws engagement with these new operations. The conservation of industrial heritage through adaptive re-use, ‘offer[s] opportunities for regeneration, sustainable new uses and a connection to a worthwhile past upon which a new layer of meaning may be forged’ (Lardner 2015, p. 3). This potential and opportunity is key to the significance of the conservation of the Fyansford Paper Mills. The intrinsic value of the remnant fabric is indeed the material, yet its social value has been extended: What is particularly notable in the Fyansford Paper Mills is how this material forms a crucible for new layers of social value as Robins not only preserves and renews its fabric, but in doing so creates synergies and relationships with tenants and the broader community (Figure 1). At the same time, the Fyansford Paper Mills, can be seen as an antidote to formal government attempts to transform the identity of declining cities. In contrast to the polished waterfront precinct of the Geelong CBD, the Fyansford Paper Mills is a grass roots outpost seeking to present an alternative narrative forged by the very people financially and socially invested in the region. As Cossens observes, ‘industrial heritage may offer identity for a community or provide the signature for a place, recognised externally’ (Cossens 2012, p. 9). In the case of the Fyansford Paper Mills, this identity presents not a static endpoint, but a palimpsest overlaid through creative synergies enabled by the conservation works.
Industrial heritage sites present distinct challenges for conservation as the built fabric and machinery designed for specific processes has become obsolete. Key to the concept of obsolescence inherent in industrial heritage is the notion that such an engineered and architecturally designed complex was purpose made, used for a period of time, technologically superseded and rendered detritus. These signs of detritus and disuse such as flaking paint, grease and dirt present potential for new meanings. Industrial heritage is challenged by an implicit disjunction between past and present uses of the built fabric and machinery, which is best managed by developing connections to the past by layering new uses and meaning on already valued places (Lardner 2015). Industrial heritage sites are vulnerable to reuse that discards the heavier, rustier, industrial equipment in favour of easier to manage paint chipped brick facades accented by aged timber doorways (Lardner 2015). This ‘destructive creation’ neglects how the very process of conservation can connect people and communities with such sites; indeed, the creative practice of engagement with grease, dirt and chemical processes that leave buildings heavily marked and tarnished with the past can also form distinct works. This is a challenge to traditional approaches to heritage, where the fabric of places is conceptualised as

Figure 1: The rich patina of the Fyansford Paper Mills carries the building’s maker heritage through to the present.
(photo by Donna Squire)

Figure 2: The Fyansford Paper Mills’ scale presents a powerful reminder of the ambition of Victorian industry.
(photo by Donna Squire)
more valuable than its uses or the process of conservation. Understood through experimental preservation, the fabric can be re-thought as an enabler of the process rather than simply as the material outcome. This significantly increases the importance of the social connections that can be created when people come together to re-imagine a disused site. At the Fyansford Paper Mills the confluence of small-scale artisan production and cultural industries presents a collection of post-industrial makers operating in a rejuvenated industrial setting and contributing their own narratives to these buildings. Restoring the act of ‘making’ to the mills is also continuing to redefine the materiality and narratives of Geelong’s industrial past in new ways. One enterprise at the mill focuses on repurposing automotive parts as furniture, in the process possibly reinventing individual items manufactured in Geelong factories in years gone by, re-engaging with Geelong’s reputation as a motor city and forming new links between the Fyansford Paper Mills and other industrial sites (Figures 2 and 3). This multi-faceted cross-pollination between stories of innovation, industrial pasts and contemporary local makers is enabling a process that uses Geelong’s industrial material as a crucible to form and re-form the city’s maker spirit.

Grassroots heritage-making and ‘creative conservation’

In seeking to understand how the grassroots origin and approach to the reuse of the paper mills goes beyond common approaches to adaptive reuse of industrial heritage, in the context of Geelong’s deindustrialisation, we refer to the theoretical lens of ‘experimental preservation’ (Otero-Pailos, Langdalen & Arrhenius 2017). This contemporary theorisation of heritage practice has emerged from interrogating preservation techniques, in order to offer new alternative modes of practice and extend those already accepted. Experimental preservation explores how the value of heritage places can be altered through operations such as copying, digitising, rematerialising and multiplying, which challenge accepted notions of authenticity and integrity. In doing so, experimental preservation opens up a space in which significance can be considered to be networked; existing within the field of social relations, practices and representations fluidly connected to the material fabric of the place in question (Otero-Pailos, Langdalen & Arrhenius 2017; Garduño Freeman 2018). Such an approach values the craft of conservation, the practice of repairs and act of repairing to be as significant as the outcome. This rebalancing is key to the argument presented in this article, that in the conservation of the paper mills a new regional identity is emerging that enables communities to reinvent themselves in the wake of deindustrialisation as ‘makers’ by reinterpreting Geelong’s past.

Since purchasing the mills in 2002, Robins has cleaned up the site, clearing more than 250 tonnes of hard rubbish from the riverbanks and 60 abandoned cars from the paddocks. Robins has also replaced old tenants whose use of the building was unsympathetic with locals invested in the region and the mills, while repairing the built fabric and making alterations to enhance its use and constructed walking trails through the landscape. Applying his considerable skill as a master craftsman, with piecemeal assistance from one or two others, Robins has been slowly restoring individual architectural details ruined by the effects of weather and time. Now retired, Robins’ personal and financial investment in the paper mills is based on years of experience as a builder on commercial high-rise as well as regular heritage projects. For Robins, the Fyansford Paper Mills is like an ‘industrial cathedral’ and his vision is for a place brought back to a new life as the focus for a creative community that contributes to the site’s ongoing re-interpretation.
Robins approaches the task of restoration with an ethos of care, authenticity and a constant focus across scales, from fine-grain detail to the whole place. This is evident in the hardwood windows that he has handcrafted to replace those that have rotted away after being boarded up with corrugated iron sheets that allowed water to pool at the sills, causing irreparable damage (Figure 4). The windows have been remade using traditional joinery techniques in accordance with the original window specifications, including the glass. Robins’ sensitive approach is similarly apparent in the remaking of timber support capitals for the columns of one of the main buildings (Figure 5). Matching the original capitals precisely, including the selection of timber species, the old capitals are being removed, one by one, and replaced with new capitals to reinstate their structural function. As important as the adherence to the original building details is, the time and personal connection Robins creates through the process of carrying out the work himself is an equally significant part of the mills’ value. Gauntlett (2011) argues that the process of making brings opportunities for social and personal connection. The practice of making at the Fyansford Paper Mills, be it conserving the building or establishing and conducting new uses in the mills, enables a strong sense of attachment with the site that extends the value of the material from the intrinsic, to a deeper, layered intangible social value created through an ever-growing network of interactions between people and place. At a broader level, the social practice of communities and visitors that participate in other activities at the mills enabled through the site’s restoration can be understood to be contributing to a new identity for Geelong centred on giving new life to disregarded sites of industrial heritage.

The value of the process of conservation can be elaborated by one of the main proponents of experimental preservation, Spanish architect, Jorge Otero-Pailos. Whilst immersed in the material practices of restoration, conservation and preservation of buildings, and particularly in the act of cleaning buildings from dust, dirt and grime, Otero-Pailos seeks to position these activities as creative and critical architectural interventions (Otero-Pailos 2006). For example, in his work at the Doge’s Palace in Venice in 2009, the cleaning process becomes a process for making art. The high-tech latex used in the process of removing the existing layers of dust and dirt form the palace walls is exhibited in its own right, repositioned as a cultural entity rather than an object of
waste for discarding. He treats the built fabric as kind of palimpsest, arguing that the layers of dust and dirt that collect upon it should be understood as components of that object’s material self and equally valid forms of culture. Seen through the lens of ‘process’ offered by Otero-Pailos’s experimental preservation rather than simply in the finished architectural artefact, the conservation work being carried out at the Fyansford Paper Mills is not only significant because of its material preservation of an important place, but also because of the way it is producing new forms of culture for the region. The fabric of the building and the process of conservation itself are equally important and clearly dependent upon one another. The conservation of the Fyansford Paper Mills can be reframed and reconceived as a form of community heritage making, where engaging with the building as a creative site allows connections to be made with Geelong’s past innovation and industrial making, hinting at an evolving maker-city identity.

While not necessarily drawing direct comparisons between Otero-Pailos’ experimental art practices arising out of technical heritage conservation and Robins’ more organic approach to piecing together the Fyansford Paper Mills, their common focus on the process of conservation aligns with a definition of heritage as a dynamic and complex entanglement between past meanings, materiality that resists stasis, and emerging community narratives. As Robins replaces the capitals of the columns his attention to the type of timber, to making the pieces himself, and to integrating these newer pieces into the existing brickwork are crucial means to connect with the building. What is significant here is not just the way the building is conserved but the desire to actually do the conservation, to make the decisions about which aspects of the patina should be maintained as culturally valuable parts of the building’s story and which need to be peeled back to reveal and re-form the narrative. As with Otero-Pailos’ approach, the process of reparation becomes a creative act, and the damaged capital a site of potency, valuable because it speaks of the ravages of time on the mill’s architecture and offers the opportunity for engagement through making its replacement. This reveals something significant about industrial heritage, where in its discarded state, its apparent functional obsolescence and unsalvageable former uses offer regenerative potential, asking for something new to be made. This potency invites processes and engagement in ways that cannot be contemplated in sites that remain relevant or operational. Like the potential of industry, which promised new opportunities for modernist prosperity, the discarded quality of the Fyansford Paper Mills invokes a maker culture and means to connect with a maker past to form a maker future.

In a period of significant economic and social upheaval for Geelong, such acts of creative conservation act as a vehicle for urban regeneration by investing discarded elements of the urban environment with renewed physical and social purpose. While local authorities focus their efforts on slow, policy-driven revitalisation initiatives for the city centre, a more organic, grassroots approach is driving a practical, hands-on renewal of all-but-forgotten spaces, in which industrial built heritage is becoming an important part of the community’s appreciation of its rich maker past, one which is being brought into the present as a new regional culture. This awareness is being fostered by the Robins’ ethos of community involvement as a key ingredient of the Paper Mills’ future success (Mitchell 2011). Despite his significant personal investment of time, money and care, Robins is keen to share this unique asset with the broader community, believing that ‘history belongs to everyone not just the person who owns the building’ (Cannon 2015). Public events at the Paper Mills such as ‘Fyansfest’ that celebrates the Vernal Equinox with a family-friendly program including music, food, wine, art, lantern walk and bonfire create an inclusive environment that invites engagement between the mill building, its environment and a new community. In the lead-up to the event, participation in the renewal of the mills by volunteering for spring cleaning or gardening is encouraged. This informal participation allows people to learn about the history, characteristics and qualities hidden within their urban environment, and in turn encourages a sense of collective responsibility for this important heritage asset rather than the helplessness of lamenting its demise.

In the act of re-making the buildings, Robins is also creating space for other makers to not only inhabit, but to invest with new meaning. The gritty, authentic character of the buildings is attracting a range of artisan tenants that together are forming a unique and vibrant maker’s village. Marcus Johnson, owner of Ubu Gallery, is one of the tenants contributing to the
The precinct’s renaissance. Like Robins, Johnson invested in the Fyansford Paper Mills without a specific plan, but rather because he felt a connection with the building. Ubu Gallery was the post-rationalisation of his commitment to the place, and now fuses exhibition with making, inviting multi-disciplinary and experimental art to take place inside the gallery while encouraging visitors to ‘explore, participate, ask questions and learn’ (UBU Gallery 2015). The gallery’s tenancy is far more than a typical commercial arrangement based on real estate and rent. Johnson shares Robins’ sense of community and is a key driver in cultivating this spirit among those who pass through the gallery’s industrial sliding doors. Though built out of the same bluestone as other buildings in the precinct, the gallery has a different aesthetic to many of the buildings now being re-used and those that have yet not been refurbished. However, the rough surface and rustic character of the bluestone remains clearly evident even though the walls have been painted white, allowing the exhibited art works to be the hero. The walls’ treatment was the result of lengthy discussions between Johnson and Robins, again demonstrating the value of the process of conservation. The choice of furnishings inside the gallery also contributes to the mill’s maker-space narrative (Figure 6). The long timber table that forms the gallery’s centrepiece is a significant nod to Geelong’s manufacturing past. The table was originally used as a cutting table in Geelong’s Godfrey Hirst textile factory. Founded in Geelong in the late 1800s, Godfrey Hirst manufactured quality textiles, helping to eliminate Australia’s dependence on England for cloth. In the 1960s it became Australia’s largest carpet manufacturer and it continues to operate in Geelong today. The new uses of the gallery space and its furnishings entrench dialogues between old and new and between newly linked objects of Geelong’s industrial past, allowing social value in the present to create new notions of authenticity. While the patina of the past beckons new makers to inhabit the space, the new inhabitants add further richness to the layered history of the built fabric. Johnson sums up the mills’ appeal when he states ‘I saw (the gallery space) and thought “I don’t know what I want to do with it but I want it”’ (Cannon 2015). In finding a new, socially inclusive use for the buildings, Robins, Johnson and the space’s other users are creating an environment that contributes to a renewed urban culture, grounded in an identity that is authentically Geelong.

Figure 6: Fyansford Paper Mills, UBU Gallery Interiors. (photo by Donna Squire)
Conclusion

The grassroots process of creative conservation of industrial heritage presents a new paradigm with hitherto underexplored possibilities for the rejuvenation of Geelong’s industrial buildings, and for a post-industrial maker’s city. The city has a legacy of grand industrial buildings built with a solidity that has outlasted their earlier functions and the ambitions of their creators. The projects canvassed in this article are but some of the industrial heritage spaces being reinvented in Geelong, many of which re-engage the relationship of historic buildings with the process of making.

The rejuvenation of the Fyansford Paper Mills demonstrates the fine-grained decision-making processes and focus on the place as a whole that are essential for creative conservation. The focus turns not just to individual fittings and materials, but the potential for engagement proffered by detritus, rust and dust that defines the identity of spaces and their city. These processes do not involve stripping the interior and memories of the space’s function, but rather a conscious focus on leaving intact or reviving past narratives as a crucible to inform future interpretation. As buildings like the Fyansford Paper Mills are reinvented, the makers that use the spaces and their creative processes in turn provide new layers to the palimpsest of industrial heritage. This represents a symbiotic relationship between these rejuvenated maker’s spaces and their post-industrial makers that can renew important elements of a city’s identity and pride.

The theoretical approach of experimental preservation, the work of Otero-Pailos and the practice of Robins and Johnson at the Fyansford Paper Mills show the potential of industrial spolia to be redeployed through creative conservation and the act of making. As Geelong grapples with its search for a post-industrial identity, the successes of emerging exemplars of material conservation suggest the value of distilling, retaining and building on the narratives of the city’s industrial heritage in forming a new social cohesion. In this way, even the functional obsolescence of industrial heritage is overcome by retaining practices of working and making within the built fabric, forming new layers that build a future based on the past.

References


