Railways [abstract]

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The demolition of railway stations in Tasmania is a salutary experience and simultaneously a story from which much can be gained. These station buildings were caught in a web which has been the fate of similar buildings on the mainland in more recent times. The 'parts of the web' are as follows.

- The buildings became redundant because of a reduction in the level of the traffic and changing methods of railway operation.
- The owner, Australian National Railways (ANR), was not prepared to spend money maintaining its redundant assets.
- The community was not well organised enough to lobby, act, or in any other way arrange to prolong the life of the buildings in question.
- The buildings were not, I believe, seen to be worth keeping at the time, given the nature of Tasmania's outstanding architectural heritage.
- Being of timber construction, the buildings deteriorated quickly.
- Being invariably located on operating railway lines, the ANR did not particularly wish to encourage the buildings to be occupied on the grounds of public safety.
- For the same reason, the ANR was not prepared to sell the title to the station grounds or to the land on which each building was situated.
- Because the buildings could not be sold, potential users were reluctant to spend a lot of money in restoration costs since they could not readily obtain sufficient security of tenure.

For these reasons, and others like them, neither the owner nor the community at large was readily able to accept responsibility for the stock of redundant station buildings. They very quickly passed into history.

The story of station buildings on the mainland states has been similar, though with some variation. The networks were much bigger, with the result that there has been both more to lose and more opportunities to save buildings. Many buildings are of brick construction which tends to survive longer than timber in a neglected state. Some states have enacted legislation to protect their railway buildings. Victoria was the first to do this in an organised way. Legislative measures on their own, however, are not the answer. Statutory protection merely gives the players more time in which to work towards saving something; and they do involve the issue of a permit to demolish, which is not always readily given. The real threat is demolition by default at the hands of the weather and local opportunists.

In practical terms the responsibility for retaining obsolete railway structures invariably rests with the community. If the community is negligent, it will lose its railway heritage. In the recent past, methods for saving old railway buildings have usually involved the owner entering into a lease with a tenant, preferably a permanent and publicly constituted body such as a local council. The tenant then spends whatever money is needed to restore the structure. When a local council is not interested it may be possible to persuade the council to act as head tenant; the real user then leases the structure from the council. The council pays nothing, leaving the arduous task to the 'sub-tenant', who has very little security over the investment at all.

There is light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak, with the increasing popularity of job-skills training programs. They provide a new avenue for funds and the use of...
human resources. Used often in conjunction with the traditional sources, miserable though they are, they can help tip the balance in a redundant building’s favour. Thus the community’s responsibility for its redundant railway buildings and for the training of its unemployed youth is merging to provide a promise for the future.

Another point needs to be made: if you think saving old railway buildings is hard and that the lines of responsibility are unclear, saving specialised structures and infrastructure – such as signal boxes and railway gates – is well nigh impossible. But that is another story . . .