New Life for Old Uses

Recycling of Buildings Seminar,
World Town Planning Day.

A review of five addresses given at the 'New Life For Old Uses' seminar, celebrating World Town Planning Day and sponsored by the Town and Country Planning Board, the Ministry for Planning, the National Trust of Australia, (Vic.), Ministry of Housing and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

The Speakers:

Hon L. Lieberman M.P. (Vic)
Minister for Planning

Mr Desmond Muirhead
Urban Planner

Ms. Anne Latreille
Journalist with The Age newspaper

Mr Trevor Kneebone
Ministry of Housing

Mr Peter McIntyre
Architect

Mr George Frew
Property Developer

This was World Planning Day, Friday, 7th of November, 1980. The Hon. L.S. Lieberman, M.P. (Minister for Planning) began his address, and the seminar, on the recycling of buildings et al. His premise was:

'We need to preserve the heritage of the past, because, by evaluating the past and understanding where we have been, we are better able to decide where it is we wish to go.'
His optimism flowed thence foreward. Yes, preservation was necessary but, advisedly, in parallel with a viable use. If the former is left for too long, the latter can become untenable.

With this view, the Government of Victoria had opted for the philosophy of encouragement and a renunciation of prohibitions which might otherwise counter or hinder innovation in the area of refurbishing elderly buildings. Surely the tide had been seen to have turned in the recent successful sale of a large Registered building within the City of Melbourne.

Mr Lieberman pined for the financial cum population base of London where it was viable for Geoffrey Holland to revive Covent Garden Market. Federal funding was required for this level of expenditure in Australia but the Treasurer had already said no.

Some limited financial assistance had been granted to historic building owners, by the Victorian Historic Buildings Preservation Council (H.B.P.C.). The thrust of Government assistance has been directed towards selected, historic gold towns, such as Maldon, Beechworth and Yackandandah, in the form of architectural advisory services, made especially available to the residents of these important precincts to advise them on preservation and restoration problems free of charge. Perhaps, too often, these showpieces have been cited with a glow of glory whilst the embarrassment of a gigantic shortfall of the assistance granted, to that sought by historic building owners throughout Victoria, has been concealed. Another shortfall of Government to activity was revealed later in the seminar, in respect to rate and tax rebates; a form of assistance that has always been available to the Government but which it has been loath to use.

Mr Desmond Muirhead followed the Honourable Minister with the Keynote Address of the seminar. From his vantage point, at the top of the world (U.S.A.), Mr Muirhead revealed the keynote of his dissertation.

......What I am going to try to do is to tell you what is happening in the rest of the world.

His speciality was retail centres, spent ones and new ones. He was sure that there were obvious advantages in recycling burnt out shop shells, when compared to new construction.

Old buildings cost less to upgrade than new ones. The finished product could be more readily visualised during the planning stages and less disruption occurred to existing trade and trade patterns - if the building was not demolished but refurbished. Small or speciality retailers often found difficulty in establishing themselves within a new Retail Centre, with no goodwill to rest upon. Recycling thus could remove many of the entrepreneurial risks by simply preserving a context.

Similarly, old Centres contained facilities for residential occupation. With the current move back toward mixed land-use and a more heterogeneous neighbourhood, these old retail buildings offered greater savings still in conversion costs. (This was demonstrated later by the Emerald Hill Project)

Desmond Muirhead cited Tokyo as a land where zoning was non-existent - where all zones occupied one zone. His own United States offered the extreme comparison:
Too often, when retail neighbourhoods were added to, or partly demolished, Retail Continuity suffered. A large department store (like Myers in Fremantle) would locate centrally, in a new building, which might be introverted in character. This perhaps suited their operations, internally, but not those perusing-promenaders of after-hours window shopping, who stared then at blank walls. The concentration of wishful buyers might falter and they might not advance to the next lighted extravagance adjoining.

Shop windows are the essence of our culture. They reveal our quality, taste, imagination, flair in manufacturing, and the design arts... shops encourage social intercourse, conversation and meetings between people, without formal introductions....

Bond Street, in London, Fifth Avenue in New York, and even Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills — all possessed that quality of 'Retail Continuity'.

Pedestrianisation was an essential ingredient to allow the appreciation of Retail Continuity. The ability to park centrally and shop on foot required compactly arranged and continuous showcases from which to select. In a suddenly pedestrianised Fremantle, Mr Muirhead soon observed and diagnosed the now more evident 'gaps in the urban wall'. Similarly, gaps plugged inappropriately were spotlit:

Children at school are being taught to relate buildings to each other now instead of doing a handstand on the corner like this!

There is a problem with architecture, that you want to allow the architect full reign where possible but the unfortunate truth is that only something like 3-4% of architects are doing good enough work to be allowed full reign. Somehow or other, you have to put an envelope onto these cities to control them.

Like the Dutch, said Muirhead, and it appeared that he was absolutely right. However he exposed the weaknesses of such envelopes when he committed his one noticeable faux-pas:

Even the Art Deco buildings of the thirties, once painted up, relate quite well to the city.

This type of comment was once reserved for those dingy looking basalt buildings and, later, for deriding the raw reds of polychrome brickwork.

Anne Latrielle then spoke of the coming publication New Uses For Old Buildings which she, and two others, had prepared for the Council of the National Trusts and the Historic Buildings Preservation Council (Vic.).

What had begun as an in-depth study of a few representative projects, had become a multi-coloured catalogue of revived buildings, Australia-wide. The peculiar nature of recycling projects, where a deal of professionalism and sometimes subterfuge is required by the entrepreneur, quickly generates a thicket of trade secrets which might be useful on the next job if protected. Hence there was a potential embargo on the disclosure of detail and in the face of this, the thrust of their preparation moved from the particular to one of generality. Notwithstanding this deviation of intent, the catalogue provides a handy clutch of diverse examples — from the renowned, to the peculiar, and the ordinary, to the popularly known.
Once an example is recognised as applicable to the readers' needs, he or she has enough information to pursue the matter to its bitter end, if so required.

Mr Trevor Kneebone (Ministry for Housing) announced that, as he was between seminars, he was recycling his notes to suit the day's proceedings.

Emerald Hill was his topic. This reputedly green hill is a single, large holding in South Melbourne upon which, almost exclusively, nineteenth century building stock remains. It contains commercial and public uses as well as many streets of housing and fifty three single and double storeyed houses, which have been, for a considerable time, leased out by the Church of England Family Care Organisation, to needy tenants. This huge 'allotment' was sold in 1973 to the State Government, as financed by the Federal Government, and the two bodies then joined the South Melbourne Municipality to form a management group.

This tripartite agreement produced its equivalent pressures: those of civic pride, concern about retention of low cost housing in the area, and the need to quickly repay the Federal funds.

Genetrification might well have occurred to serve the latter but, after the subsequent renovations 'to contemporary standards', it is the stated intention to subsidise the rental of those tenants that remain, to prevent it occurring. Current policy is to retain 70% for welfare housing. Meanwhile the remaining 30% of the houses will be leased, at contemporary rates. During a later site inspection, it appeared that the renovation standard achieved would gain a tidy return at current rental levels. During the same inspection, we were told that a few tenants had decided to leave their renewed and subsidized dwellings. However, later enquiries revealed that these tenants had simply grown too old for a life alone. Conservation has been limited to sympathetic renovation of the street facades and fences. When Mr Kneebone told us that conservation funds had not been made available for the project, this agreed with what we saw later, on site, where valuable and intact papered interiors were either being stripped or were receiving their third coat of wonderful white. There appeared to be no effort being made to record them before they expired except perhaps, as a record of the squalor they might have once epitomised.

It may be a wonder that these homes had survived for so long, en bloc, and shared in a minimum serve of refurbishment but no wonders remain to behold, now, amongst their vital internal parts.

Externally, the treatment of the block maintains the continuity of its lifetime to now. Internally, it will serve well as a mix of subsidised and medium priced inner city housing, and no doubt repay its debts, although, its original tenants may not remain.

The commercial building content will be upgraded and unutilised spaces, within its fabric, will be turned to housing. Non-conforming uses have made way for a park and the municipal presence of the Town Hall, centrally placed as it is, will add the patriarchal note to this lovely emerald green village.
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Meanwhile, of the fifty three houses cited, fifty have already re-accommodated their former occupants between as new walls. One old-time tenant is a Miss Bourke who first glimpsed Emerald Hill at the age of three and this was in 1899. Who, amongst pensioners of her age could hope for a more comfortable old age, among her old friends, and up and down her favourite streets.

Peter McIntyre (Architect) then spoke of the Henry Jones Jam Factory. Where fruit conserves once concentrated in thousands, now a busy shopping centre goes about its business.

To remind us of its past, the Jam Factory has kept its pulleys and drive-shafts, myriads of service pipes and two large boilers, one of which is still servicing the building. The fabric has been sand-blasted, bricks and basalt alike, and added finishes have been 'in keeping' but without restoration intent.

However, all has been not as sweet as this scenario. McIntyre and McIntyre began their task in 1973 when projects in the United States, such as Ghiradelli Square and the Spaghetti Factory had inspired the world towards retention of the urban fabric. However, Melbourne building regulations, although archaic, had been developed around new building construction and contradicted the very fabric of the big jam-coloured building. The use-zoning also contradicted the proposed use. McIntyre produced an environmental impact statement, for the responsible planning authority, to aid the rezoning, but it was four years before the authority acquiesced. Another year took care of the building regulations whilst it took a mere twelve months to actually build it. Mr McIntyre states:

My observation is that a lot of people in Melbourne...do want very much to achieve worthwhile things...on the other hand, the impediments to actually getting there are so great, so many things fall by the wayside.
Mr George Frew arrived late to the speaker's chair, but, in respect to recycling of buildings, he was earlier than most. He spoke of a mythical albatross which had hung, alas, too long about his conscience. His inadvertent demolition of the former Geelong Grammar School had proven too harsh a memory. This glorious pile of stone had briefly hindered the progress of Mr Frew's first Commodore Motel, and hence the feathered fiend had been created.

Subsequently he had been striving for absolution. The Old Melbourne Motor Inn, built upon an historic site in Flemington Road, was one such attempt. Here he contrived a mock New Orleans-style, colossus of kitsch which paralleled with American trends in motel marketing. However, the genuine article came with the Grain Store. This was the former Levicks and Piper wholesale ironmonger's warehouse of 1859, which became upstairs and downstairs bars, and an intermediate level restaurant—all fitted out in that olde worlde way, already demonstrated at the Old Melbourne Motor Inn. Next in King Street, was the Melbourne Underground discotheque and its sequel, a Greek Revival building of 1937, called Inflation.

And so to his latest: The Goldsrough Mort Building, at the corner of William and Bourke Street, which bravely faces three Internationally Styled skyscraper-adversaries, on the adjacent corners. The building is Registered under the Historic Buildings Act of Victoria and survives only after lengthy preservation battles which may be seen to derive from the following circumstances.

Thrown in with his bluestone purchase, Mr Frew received a 40-50 page report which had been prepared by the former owners to prove, Mr Frew will claim, how inviable retention of the building was. Renovation costs totalled $3,800,000, the report said, and that was in 1975.

Perhaps, because of this knowledge and the statutory protection of the building, Mr Frew was able to purchase it for a low $1,200,000. However, this did not prepare him for the municipal rates and State Land Tax which were both based on an unimproved land value of $2,750,000. The sewerage authority wanted theirs too.

This then was the system: the rules of the Central Business District state firmly that a property owner must develop his site, to its capacity, or lose financially on his investment. Goldsborough had but four floors for rent: the B.H.P. Building opposite had 41 floors and yet rates and taxes were equivalent. The Government had been slow to either use the existing legislation or create new laws to abate Mr Frew's agony. Court action had, as a consequence, been proceeding as a stalling tactic.

I can tell you categorically, I will be trying as hard as I can, not to do any more historic buildings. It is not worth it. I want to do it but the risk is too great. People like me go broke.....
The Hon. Mr Lieberman (Minister for Planning) had sounded more optimistic than Mr Frew. Perhaps it was because of a recent announcement made by the Ministry (subsequent to the seminar) of Land Tax abatements and possible Federal Government tax concessions for restoration expenditure to be considered under depreciation provisions of the Act. Guaranteed fast-track planning approvals were also offered and possible Government tenancy of historic buildings. However municipal and service rates still remain: the Government not being prepared to compensate the City of Melbourne for lost revenue. Federal tax rebates are yet to be seen and it still rests with the bureaucracy whether Government departments will find specific historic buildings to their liking or their standards.

Thus the speeches had ended and the workshops had begun. They took the form of earnestly chattering groups or sparsely numbered seminar samplers scattered across large bus-interiors, on their way to a case study or two.

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Architectural Historian

Acknowledgements:
Ms. Patricia Whatley (Town and Country Planning Board)

Notes:
2. The Age newspaper, 6.2.1981, p.3.