SENTIMENTAL AND HISTORIC GROUNDS

Development or Conservation?

Changing Perceptions and Priorities at Three Sydney Landmarks

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I am indebted to Professor Ken Cable for bringing to my attention the fascinating and revelatory case of proposed relocation of St. Andrew's Cathedral.

What are we like? How have we come to be the way we are? Is there, along the path from past to present, any evidence of a consistent course, a perceptible trajectory which suggests what we may be like in the future?

The evidence on which we base our answers to these questions accumulates in museums, in collections as diverse as palaeontology, archaeology or decorative arts. The natural environment is likewise a mirror of both our stewardship and our depredations. Our streets are lined with buildings grand or humble, which both exemplify the attitudes and values of their builders and reflect, in their various states of preservation, neglect or demolition, our subsequent perceptions and priorities.

A case in point is the controversy surrounding a 1925 proposal to demolish St. Andrew's Cathedral, in George Street, and to re-erect it on the site of Hyde Park Barracks and the Mint.

The Story

Since at least 1924, Sydney City Council had mooted the resumption of the St Andrew's Cathedral site 'for the extension of the administrative offices of the Town Hall.' The Church resisted this scheme and, at its October, 1924 Synod, passed the following resolution:

That in view of the long historic association connected with St Andrew's Cathedral, the first stone of the foundation having been laid on September 1st 1819, by Governor Macquarie, this Synod strongly deprecates any sale or resumption of the Cathedral site ...

The issue came to a head in 1927 when City Railways declared that it needed a portion of the cathedral site for the construction of an underground railway station. The railway, progress incarnate, had joined forces with Municipal Authority to advance a dual claim on the site which outweighed mere 'historic association.'

In return for the site, the Government first offered the site of the Mint, in Macquarie St, which the Church rejected as too small. The next offer included the Mint, the adjoining 'Law Courts' (Hyde Park Barracks) and a payment of £500,000.

'Opponents of the proposed transfer,' said the Sydney Herald, 'base their opposition mainly on sentimental and historic grounds.' Official Church opposition, however, crumbled with most unsentimental haste.

Dean Talbot urged the Church not to miss 'this opportunity of re-erecting our beloved cathedral in nobler proportions,' adding that 'future generations would never forgive' failure to accept the Government offer.

Meanwhile, a Defence Committee, composed of maverick clergy and an 'influential section of members of the Church,' advanced two arguments, neither historic nor sentimental, against the plan:

- There was already a large parish church, St James', in Macquarie St.
- The Mint site was only 200 yards from St Mary's Cathedral and might thus provoke 'invidious comparisons.'

The 'historic grounds', such as they were, were adduced by a deputation to Premier Bavin, in a...
petition claiming that the cathedral's removal would 'destroy history as embodied in the many commemorative plates on its walls.'

The only 'sentimental' argument was advanced by Mr Camp, who called St Andrew's 'the most beautiful building in the Southern Hemisphere' and advocated its removal to Canberra rather than Macquarie St.

Harder heads prevailed at the 'special session' of the 1927 Synod of the Diocese of Sydney, where the agreement to accept the combined Mint/Hyde Park Barracks site (and the half million pounds) in exchange for the existing cathedral site, was ratified by a vote of 196 to 97.

One objection to the scheme focused on the Mint site rather than the cathedral itself. In November, 1927, the Town Planning Association, under the distinguished leadership of Sir John Sulman, voiced its disapproval on the grounds that it was 'essential that King St should be continued through the Domain,' in order to relieve traffic congestion in Queen's Square. This objection was ignored and it seemed that the fate of three Sydney landmarks was sealed.

Politics, however, brought about an ironic reversal of roles. In October, 1928, a new State Government informed the Synod that 'the site of the Cathedral is not required for any public purpose [and] we are unable to adopt the Agreement ...'

The Church indignantly demanded that the agreement be honoured. By 1929, City Railway had begun construction of Town Hall Station on a reduced scale that did not imperil the cathedral. Outraged, the Synod continued to press 'our righteous claim,' inveighing against the perfidy of politicians in the apocalyptic rhetoric of high ecclesiastical dudgeon.

In the meantime, as the Great Depression asserted itself, the likelihood of the Government's parting with £500,000 dwindled. Although 'negotiations' continued for another year, by 1931 the issue had disappeared from both Church and public records.


Nineteen twenty-seven's "malign or traumatic history" is today's "self respecting past".

St Andrew’s Cathedral

According to The Heritage of Australia, ‘... a remarkably cohesive whole, one of the few city churches that can be appreciated from all aspects.’ The National Trust’s classification proposal adds, ‘The building is important for its ecclesiastical history and function in the Sydney Diocese.’

The Mint

Its National Trust classification states, ‘[It is] part of Sydney’s oldest remaining building complex, being bound up with Australia’s early colonial history.’ Now restored, the building is operated as a museum by the Powerhouse Museum.

Hyde Park Barracks

According to the National Trust, ‘... probably Francis Greenway’s finest work. It is beautifully detailed and proportioned and is a fine example of civic design as it was conceived by Greenway and Governor Macquarie to be a key element in a grand town plan ... It still forms a vital component of its precincts.’ Restored in 1976, Hyde Park Barracks is now maintained as a museum and historic site by the Historic Houses Trust (NSW).

Here, then are three places which certainly exhibit the Australian Heritage Commission Act’s 1975 criteria for inclusion in the National Estate: ‘aesthetic, historic ... or social significance.’ as well as Kerr’s ‘ability to demonstrate; association links; and formal or aesthetic qualities.’ Yet, a mere half-century earlier, none of these virtues was sufficiently apparent to State, Municipal or Church authorities to prevent the destruction of all three. How can we account for this transformation?

Although the words ‘conservation’ and ‘heritage’ are notably absent from the 1927 controversy, the concepts were certainly not unknown at the time. As early as 1904, the New South Wales Public Works Department had undertaken the conservation of Old Government House, in Paramatta. Perhaps, then, the kind of heritage - the nature of the associations embodied in these particular buildings - made them less worthy of preservation in contemporary eyes.

Possibly the Hyde Park Barracks, as a tangible reminder of the ‘convict stain’ had about it something of the hereditas damnosa to which Lowenthal refers. Perhaps the relocation of the cathedral offered a welcome pretext, as he puts it, ‘to forget or obliterate a malignant or traumatic history.’

The Mint, as part of a hospital ‘built by and for convicts and paid for by giving a rum monopoly to the builders,’ may have partaken of the same unspoken social stigma.

St Andrew’s only failing seems to have been its relatively modest proportions. The archbishop declared, in his presidential address to the 1927 Synod, ‘Without doubt it is far too small for a great city and this inadequacy will become more urgent each year ...’ The relocation thus represented an opportunity for 1927 to dissociate itself from the more humble means and modest, colonial aspirations of 1819.

Each of our three buildings may, in one way or another, have been associated, in Lowenthal’s words, with an ‘archaic, degrading phase of history.’

Dobby notes the criticism that ‘conservation at the very least inhibits progress and change.’ The notion of progress, as yet unalloyed with present-day misgivings, was a powerful force in the ’20s and among its tenets was the desirability of growth and expansion at all costs.

Even if Hyde Park Barracks and the Mint failed to fall like dominoes as bureaucratic expansion and technological growth propelled a burgeoning cathedral from George to Macquarie St, the Town Planning Association’s assertion that traffic jams in Queen’s Square made it ‘essential’ to drive King St through the Domain, paid no heed to the fact that the Mint and Barracks stood in the way. Presumably, if they could not be circumvented, progress could simply brush them aside.

Clearly Sydneysiders preferred to focus on the development of a new and brighter heritage for ‘future generations,’ rather than on the conservation of the tarnished relics of the convict and colonial past.

To say, then, that our three ‘spaces’ have in the last half-century been transformed into ‘places’ of cultural significance is also to say that attitudes, like times, have changed. A ‘window of opportunity’ for heritage conservation that was closed then, is open now.

Dobby detects in heritage ‘an excellent means of escape from our form of civilisation’ as well as a recognition by a better educated population that both ‘urban industrial conditions [and] great architectural works ... were important in moulding present society which cannot be understood without them.’

Lowenthal likens conservation of heritage to the psychoanalytic process through which ‘each person achieves a “useful and self-respecting past”’ and claims that ‘we preserve because the pace of change
has attenuated a legacy integral to our identity and well-being.\textsuperscript{29}

If in today’s Sydney the conservation of St Andrew’s, the Mint and Hyde Park Barracks indicates that, in what Raza calls the ‘dialectic of transformation,’\textsuperscript{30} the ‘pull of tradition’ has grown stronger, perhaps it is a reflection of this communal search for a reaffirmation of identity in times of economic gloom and social uncertainty.

Psychologists and sociologists tell us that anxiety and crises of identity are typical of individuals and societies in transition. It is evident that we are undergoing such a transition at present. We define ourselves, almost exclusively by reference to the past - we are ‘post-war’, ‘post-industrial’, ‘post-modern’... I have even seen ‘post-disco’! Post-this and post-that but pre-what?

The current transition may differ significantly from previous periods of transition through which humanity has passed. It may not be simply a rough passage between one relatively steady state and the next. The constantly accelerating pace of change suggests that this is, rather, a transition to a permanent state of transition.

If, in addition to the welter of economic, social and environmental challenges we face today, we are also confronted with the ‘meta-challenge’ of adapting to transition as the norm, stability as the exception, what does this giddy trajectory augur for the competing processes of development and conservation in our cities?

Certainly the genuine necessity for development will clamour, as always, for increasing space. With equal certainty, however, increasingly disoriented populations will now demand more ‘place’ in which to anchor and to celebrate their individual and collective identities. Just as development is essential to our physical and economic survival, so conservation is indispensable to our social and spiritual health.

If we have not yet found a way to distil from this dialectical opposition a new synthesis - Raza’s ‘modernisation of tradition’\textsuperscript{31} - then at least we can now acknowledge what is at stake and make our choices with awareness and care. If we can add good management to good luck, perhaps there will be time for conservation to reach a workable, adaptive compromise with development and for development to find new merit in sentimental and historic grounds.
Endnotes

2 YBDS, 1925, p. 285.
4 Sydney Herald, Aug. 3, 1927. p.15, col.g.
9 Sydney Herald, Nov. 26, 1927. p.17, col.f. (italics mine)
12 Sydney Herald, Nov. 10, 1927. p.11, col.c.
14 YBDS, 1930. p.301.
20 J.S. Kerr. loc. cit.
25 D. Lowenthal. loc. cit.
28 Ibid. loc. cit.
29 M. Raza. Time, Place and Culture – An Indian Profile, in A Sense of Place, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 1989. p.95.
30 Ibid. p.96.

Bibliography


Kerr, J. 'Macquarie St, Queen’s Square and College St Precinct.' In The Heritage of Australia. Macmillan Co, Sydney, 1981.


