The significance of industrial places and their re-use [abstract]

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The adaptive re-use of industrial buildings and complexes poses a particular problem as their significance often rests on the historical or technical interest of the process involved and/or on in their social importance to the community in which they operated. To what extent and how can that be reflected in the fabric which is subject to adaptive re-use?

This paper examines briefly a number of major industrial complexes where heritage managers have sought to retain significance in a redevelopment context (that is, Darling Flour Mill, Victoria Brewery, Pelaco Short Factory, Bryant & May, Swallow & Ariel), and asks whether these are successfully conserved memorials to our industrial past or sanitised shells that provide perhaps chic but little history. What is a realistic expectation in the circumstances?

At the Darling Flour Mill at Sunshine and the Victorian Brewery in East Melbourne, brave attempts have been made to require the retention of machinery and equipment. Success at the flour mill remains untested as it is simply locked up, but the Victoria Brewery experience suggests that the end result will be a parody of the original intention.

A much-lauded conversion of the IXL Jam Factory in Prahran has seen all but two objects removed and the centre reinterpreted with the blandest of finishes.

These and other examples show how hard it is to retain any meaningful representation of industrial processes on site. Perhaps we have to accept that the conservation of industrial machinery and equipment belongs in a museum or on film, and concentrate on retaining the major elements of the building which symbolise rather than demonstrate its cultural significance.