PART 2

Commentaries
and Vignettes

World Heritage in Fremantle

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It is amazing to think that of the 962 extraordinary World Heritage Sites that span the globe only 260 of these are within cities and only 10 per cent are in the Asia Pacific region.

The historic port city of Fremantle on the West Coast of Australia is fortunate to have one of these remarkably rare urban World Heritage sites close to its city centre. In fact, the Fremantle Prison, originally known simply as ‘The Convict Establishment’, is Western Australia’s only World Heritage listed building and was listed as part of a serial nomination with ten other Australian Convict Sites by UNESCO in 2010.

The Fremantle Prison was built by convict labour between 1852 and 1859 using limestone quarried on the site and was opened in 1859. It ran as a prison until it was decommissioned in 1991, meaning the Prison was continuously used as a place of incarceration for almost 140 years.

Fast forward to 2014 and the prison is now used for a variety of purposes. Front and centre is its strong tourism appeal. More than 3 million visitors have passed through the front gates of Fremantle Prison in the last 20 years, making it one of Fremantle’s key tourist attractions.
Adaptive reuse is also important. There is no doubt that our built heritage is best protected when it is used and it continues to be part of the living fabric of a city.

The Fremantle Prison’s twenty-plus buildings have been put to a range of community uses including as a home to the Fremantle Children’s Literature Centre, which nurtures young people’s interest in reading and writing, and Business Foundations that operate as a business incubator for the Fremantle area.

More recently, an approval for a new 200 bed youth-hostel facility in the former female wing of the prison was granted. This will enable guests to spend a night in a cell, creating a unique and memorable tourist experience without damaging the heritage fabric.

In addition to adaptive reuse, a further challenge for local governments such as the City of Fremantle is in managing the interface of the important heritage parts of the Fremantle city centre, like the Fremantle Prison, with newer, higher-density urban developments that are put forward.

In Fremantle we have dealt with this through strong planning controls that include clear buffer zones to ensure that any new development gives Fremantle Prison proper curtilage. This protection recognises that buildings create places, through the zones of influence that surround them and which are larger than their outer walls or property boundaries. As a result the Fremantle Council has only supported higher density development at an appropriate distance from the Fremantle Prison.

This strong focus on protection and adaptive reuse, in addition to embracing tourism and heritage interpretation, has meant that one of the largest surviving convict prisons in the world today is now a well-used and greatly treasured part of Fremantle’s very special historic landscape.