

Frozen in time, we've become blind to ways to build sustainability into our urban heritage

August 22 2022, by James Lesh



The Walsh Bay Arts Precinct development won the Greenway Award for Heritage. Credit: MDRX/Wikimedia, [CC BY-SA](#)

It was hard to keep up with all the bad news coming out of the recent [Australia State of the Environment](#) report. The dire state of natural places and First Nations heritage rightly attracted attention. However, one important finding was overlooked: the poor state of Australia's so-called historic heritage.

The report [found](#) this [heritage](#) is at risk on many fronts. It's under pressure from [land development](#), [resource extraction](#), poorly managed tourism, [climate change](#) and inadequate management and protections.

In a familiar framing, the report points the finger at [urban development](#) and other changes. However, this mindset itself is actually an obstacle to protecting our urban heritage.

Change in our cities, and to our heritage, is both inevitable and necessary. Our relationships to neighborhoods and places constantly evolve, as we learnt during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Policy ideas framed by sustainability, such as [adaptive management](#) that encourages heritage places to change and evolve, are more sensible. Flexible and creative responses to heritage places should be allowed.

An example of embracing change is the [Walsh Bay Arts Precinct](#) in Sydney. The project has reimaged maritime heritage for culture and the arts.

Adopting new perspectives won't only preserve our [historic buildings](#) and places by enabling us to shape them for today's needs. It will also mean urban heritage can contribute to cities becoming more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

A problem of definitions

The [historic heritage](#) that the report finds is deteriorating refers to places, buildings and structures dating from 1788 onwards. But the very idea of "historic heritage" [is out-of-date](#).

The term originally contrasted colonial built heritage with so-called "pre-history." [Indigenous heritage](#) was generally seen as being in the past

rather than continuing into the present or having a future.

A more precise term, "cultural heritage," embraces the diverse historical and societal values that shape cities and historic environments. It better recognizes that our urban [cultural heritage](#) is a product of colonization and dispossession and located on Indigenous Country.

On the ground, we see a few examples of more progressive activities. The deeply researched [City of Melbourne Hoddle Grid Review](#) embraced Indigenous perspectives, [social values](#) and modern buildings. But this is an unusual case of innovation.

A problem of knowledge

For heritage to contribute more to social sustainability, by ensuring places reflect and strengthen [diverse communities](#), we need more robust knowledge about existing protections.

We simply [lack that data](#). Australia has no heritage reporting mechanisms across national, state and local heritage jurisdictions.

As a result, the State of the Environment report was unable to provide a fuller picture of the state of urban heritage: what is protected, why and how it is protected, nor its values and condition. The report was not funded for this kind of comprehensive data collection, nor for widespread site visits.

We cannot identify which Australian communities and histories—whether First Nations, colonial or multicultural stories—are represented within heritage lists. The five-year report identifies [only six targeted projects](#) exploring gaps in state heritage registers. Only one of these studies foregrounds social value.

Centralizing community perspectives in heritage remains a challenge. For example, when the [City of Ballarat collaborated with residents](#) to identify places of importance, the insights could not be translated into protections because planning laws don't adequately recognize [community heritage expertise](#). Work needs to be done to integrate heritage management and social sustainability.

A problem of adaptation

Expanding the scope of urban heritage enables new perspectives on how it can contribute to economic and environmental sustainability.

Economic development can threaten heritage, but also rescue it from decay. Leading heritage projects treat existing physical and social spaces as significant but underutilized resources.

The [regeneration of Sydney's Kings Cross](#), for example, seeks to return glitz and glamor to the area, albeit minus its gritty and subversive character. Heritage and communities are both enhanced and diminished through development and investment.

The report rightly identifies climate change as a threat to heritage places. Yet, [across jurisdictions](#), inadequate emphasis is placed on heritage as [a driver](#) of climate adaptation. Reworking existing environments, buildings and structures, whether or not they are heritage-listed, [is a sustainability trend](#).

Indeed, the report encourages the retention of existing buildings for their [embodied energy](#) due to the resources that have gone into constructing and maintaining them. But it maintains the premise that development tends to undermines conservation.

This longstanding mindset stands in the way of [widespread adaptive reuse](#). Adopting broader perspectives and new approaches empowers

heritage for sustainability agendas.

Although not heritage-listed, Broadmeadows Town Hall (1964) in Melbourne has been [conserved and transformed](#) in a sophisticated and functional way. At Melbourne's Southbank, the listed [Robur Tea House](#) may soon finally be revitalized. Reworking the 1880s industrial building with a skyscraper above may well be the best way forward.

What's stopping us from doing better?

With clear parallels to today, the [Inquiry into the National Estate](#) reported in 1974 that Australia's heritage had been "downgraded, disregarded, and neglected." The Commonwealth government [took dramatic action](#) by establishing the independent and innovative [Australian Heritage Commission](#) (1975–2004).

In recent times, however, the Commonwealth has [greatly reduced its involvement](#) in conserving urban heritage. Every state and local government now has its own approaches, resulting in [fragmented governance arrangements](#). The lack of national leadership, co-ordination and innovation has led to us falling behind [international approaches](#).

The way the heritage field has evolved over the past years is giving cultural heritage a great opportunity to work massively as a driver for sustainable urban development.

Find out more in this article by Miguel Rivas! [#URBACT @URBACT #kairosurbact https://t.co/pk2fLHCWEg pic.twitter.com/Gf24btXwmM](#)

— KAIROS (@KAIROS_URBACT) [June 8, 2022](#)

Urban heritage can strengthen communities and help foster an inclusive

and democratic society only by engaging with a diversity of places and stories. Widespread adaptation and reuse of both listed and non-listed heritage places can support economic and environmental sustainability.

New and radical perspectives are needed to keep heritage relevant and thriving in cities.

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