

Canberra's heritage: an impoverished debate

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Canberra is a relatively affluent and educated community, a progressive community in many ways, yet we seem to have very ill-informed debates about heritage issues.

The news media has been full of heritage stories in the recent past. The registration of the Northbourne housing precinct, the National Trust challenge to extend the registration to the full precinct, and the ACT government's plans to demolish nearly all of the existing buildings and redevelop the precinct have been one major focus of attention. Another has been the proposed National Heritage listing for parts of Canberra reflecting themes of inspired planning and the creation of the home of Australian democracy.

In these and other stories, heritage is often portrayed simplistically as the villain or the saviour, in particular that heritage 'locks up places', prevents development or change, or comes at a great cost. Yet the reality is very different.

Canberra has had statutory heritage systems of one form or another since the 1970s, and in the case of the current ACT Heritage Register, there are about 1800 registered places, mostly houses in heritage precincts like Reid and Barton. The long history of these registrations, especially of the many houses which have been sympathetically upgraded and extended, does not support the view that heritage places are locked up.

The former Kingston Powerhouse (now the Canberra Glassworks) and former Hotel Acton (now part of NewActon) are two prominent institutional or commercial examples which also challenge this view.

Heritage places can and should normally have an ongoing viable life and use, and sympathetic development or change is the reasonable objective which is often achieved. This has been the experience in numerous examples across the ACT and in other jurisdictions.

The Northbourne housing precinct should be no different, and reports prepared for the ACT government and obtained by the *Canberra Times* indicate that the sympathetic adaptive reuse of the precinct is possible.

The National Heritage listing of Canberra is apparently stalled because of ACT government concerns about the impact on development and growth, even though the government considers Canberra's special qualities are already protected through other mechanisms.

In both situations, the understanding about heritage and its implications seems ill-informed and stuck on views which might have been expected in the 1970s or '80s. Forty years of heritage legislation and systems and debates appear not to have moved such thinking, despite all the evidence of a different reality.

Returning to the proposed Canberra listing, it is surprising to contrast this with the recent announcements about the Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne. Commonwealth Minister Greg Hunt has asked for the market to be assessed for the National Heritage List, and has even suggested World Heritage listing. Canberra has been assessed and the decision stalled for some years despite a clear case for listing – the national capital is surely National Heritage.

It seems sadly ironic that the Commonwealth talks up the importance of the Queen Victoria Market, a place largely unknown outside Victoria, while the Canberra decision languishes. Ironic too that National Heritage listing has been successfully achieved for Adelaide and Broken Hill.

It is interesting to see the recent World Heritage debate about the Great Barrier Reef also suffers from poor information. This debate is about whether the reef should formally be considered in danger under the World Heritage Convention. I am no expert on the reef, but note the marine park authority outlook report of 2014 concluded, 'Even with the recent management initiatives to reduce threats and improve resilience, the overall outlook for the Great Barrier Reef is poor, has worsened since 2009 and is expected to further deteriorate in the future.' In danger or just a really serious problem, the Commonwealth has committed an extra \$100 million to the reef at a time of great financial restraint.

Leaving this important question to one side, I want to focus on another aspect of the debate. Despite what some might wish, in danger listing is not intended as a punishment or criticism, it is a call to action for the country and international community to protect World Heritage.

At the same time that Australia has been fighting to avoid in danger listing, the United States in danger listing of the Everglades National Park will be reviewed at the forthcoming meeting of the World Heritage Committee in late June/early July.

In this case, the United States itself sought in danger listing, mindful of the problems confronting the Everglades, and the need to find remedies. Why can the United States understand and embrace this aspect of the World Heritage system and yet in Australia we perpetuate misunderstandings and struggle to avoid it?

None of this is to suggest that solving heritage issues is necessarily easy or straightforward. On the contrary, these can be a complex puzzle requiring careful thought, expertise, skill and sometimes hard choices. But none of this is helped by ill-informed views.

The heritage sector, including the ACT Heritage Council at the local level, tries to provide good expert information to inform such debates, though no doubt a lot more can be done.

In the case of the council, doing more would require greater resourcing and better access to government. But others bear some responsibility to be better informed as well – politicians, the business and property sectors, and the media.

Evidence must drive policy and technical debates, not prejudice or misinformation. The continuing promotion of ill-informed views about heritage issues impoverishes the debate, leaves the community worse off, and threatens the modest heritage outcomes our community has been able to achieve.

Duncan Marshall is the immediate past chairman of the ACT Heritage Council, and in 2015 was awarded the inaugural Bathurst Macquarie Heritage Medal.