



WORKING WITH HERITAGE

IN THE FIRST INSTALMENT OF A TWO-PART SERIES ABOUT WORKING WITH HERITAGE CONSTRAINTS, **AR** SPOTLIGHTS A NEO-GOTHIC CHURCH PROJECT BY KISTER ARCHITECTS. IN THE NEXT ISSUE WE'LL FOCUS ON ALBERT PARK HIGH'S ART AND ENVIRONMENT PRECINCT BY SIX DEGREES ARCHITECTS, LOCATED IN A 19TH CENTURY DRILL HALL AND POST OFFICE AND RECIPIENT OF 2017 INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS' AWARDS IN THE EDUCATION AND HERITAGE CATEGORIES.

/ SUSANNE KENNEDY

HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE AND PROTECTION

Buildings, places and objects are legally protected at the local, state, national or international level, when considered important for our understanding of history and development in a corresponding area.

If protected, a property cannot be developed without a permit or permit exemption from the Heritage Office, which oversees the protective register, list or overlay. (An overlay is a local government planning tool for regulating municipal development.)

Heritage importance or 'significance' can relate to architectural style and fabric, landscape, archaeology, aesthetic, culture or science, or a combination of these.

Ilana Kister recently finished restoring and converting an 1890s bluestone Gothic Revival church in Collingwood, Victoria, into a family home. The church is protected under the City of Yarra Heritage Overlay HO336 as "an individually significant building".

IDENTIFYING LEGAL PROTECTIONS

While Heritage protection is often flagged when a property changes hands

at sale, it is essential for an architect to confirm Heritage status.

This can be done by searching the local government Heritage 'inventory' and State Register of Heritage Places corresponding to the property's location. The (two) national Heritage lists should also be searched, although inclusion on these is less common. Some states, such as New South Wales and Victoria, have Heritage databases that list local and state protected properties.

Only Heritage lists or registers governed by state or commonwealth acts are legally binding. The National Trust's list is, for instance, non-binding. (See breakout box.)

HERITAGE SUPPORT SERVICES

Most states have free Heritage advisory services that draw on diverse expertise. And some local government and State Heritage Councils have streamlined processes for more straightforward permit applications.

Comprehensive online guidelines are normally available to assist architects and property owners with Heritage planning applications. Hunting these down and starting a dialogue with a local Heritage officer are essential first steps.





CONSULTANT COMPATIBILITY AND KEY RELATIONSHIPS

A number of specialists are typically involved from the outset when preparing Heritage and, where necessary, town planning permit applications. Kister commissioned reports from an independent Heritage consultant, as required, and from service engineers and a building surveyor. As mentioned, establishing and maintaining good communication with the relevant Heritage officer should be a priority. "I usually meet with Heritage officers a number of times throughout the project," says Kister.

The architect recommends shopping around for a Heritage consultant that is on the same page and understands what you are trying to do. "Some consultants are more conservative and go by the letter of the law. While others are more open to new ideas," she says.

PREDICTABILITY AND PERMITS

Because the church is located in an area with an industrial history, it is also subject to an Environmental Overlay, so soil tests were required to measure and, where possible, mitigate unsafe levels of lead and other contaminants. This testing was comprehensive and costly, and stalled construction by a month.

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KISTER COMMISSIONED REPORTS FROM AN INDEPENDENT HERITAGE CONSULTANT, AS REQUIRED, AND FROM SERVICE ENGINEERS AND A BUILDING SURVEYOR.

"Heritage projects are much less predictable than greenfield development," says Kister. "But Heritage constraints make you push the boundaries, which is why they often produce the most exciting outcomes."

In most cases, town planning permits are also required to ensure that any development is appropriate to context.

Required documentation for Kister's Heritage application included assessments from the independent Heritage architect, council Heritage officer and specialists mentioned above; completed pro forma paperwork; and Kister's proposed plans (to convert the church into a family room and study, and locate the core of the family home beside it).

DON'T GIVE UP

If a planning permit is issued, it will stipulate the new works that can

happen, and any restrictions or restoration requirements.

If, however, the council decides to reject the proposal and issue a Notice of Refusal, it is not necessarily the last word. A review of the council decision by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) can be requested.

SHOULD IT STAY OR GO?

The question of what to remove or demolish is, perhaps, the most sensitive architectural Heritage issue.

Kister's application proposed the removal of additions made decades after the original church was built, namely: a hall to the north of the church, a timber apse to its rear and brick infill in the immense, lancet windows between hall and church. Approval of their removal was contingent on Heritage report recommendations and assessments of the age and significance of these elements.

Kister ultimately received approval for all proposed construction and demolition, provided she documented the apse demolition, retained and restored its impressive Ferguson and Urie stained glass windows, and replaced the church's front doors in the original neo-Gothic style.

(Note: the property is now on the market, so the permit and its conditions will be passed on to the property's future owner/s.)



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ZEN DEMOLITION

The architect is quick to mention an often overlooked profession. “Ultimately with Heritage projects, the demolition guys are even more critical than the builders,” says Kister. “The process of opening up the [immense, bricked-over arched] windows, for instance, was very, very slow, because we didn’t know how sound they would be. So the demolition phase took a month whereas, in other circumstances, it might have just taken a week.”

RISE TO THE SCALE

Kister has found that scale and lack of symmetry are two of the biggest challenges encountered when working with Heritage constraints.

“Additions need to be big enough so that they don’t look diminished,” she says. “At the same time, they need to take a step back.”

Heritage regulations in Australia stipulate that new works be kept distinct from Heritage elements, and

not overwhelm, damage, confuse or inhibit appreciation of the latter. Thus, while the massing of the modern wing is compatible with the neo-Gothic building, it has been vertically and horizontally staggered to ensure the church stays in focus: the new ground storey stops below the church eaves – as dictated by the council permit – and the second storey is set back on the property.

ASYMMETRY AND DETAIL

Because many Heritage buildings were built before the machine age, they are usually (wonderfully) imperfect, or asymmetrical. So the Heritage detail we tend to be drawn to can present considerable challenges, if not headaches, for the architect.

“I would have made 20 site visits just to resolve the skylight interface in the [new] entrance because it was so complicated,” says Kister. “But, in the end, every single visitor stops to say ‘wow’ where the glass is cut around the (bluestone) column.” **ar**



HERITAGE LISTS

State: *If state significant, a building is listed on the Heritage Register of the state it is located in – if in Western Australia, the State Heritage Office WA, if in Launceston, the Tasmanian Heritage Council Register, for example. State registration automatically triggers local significance.*

Local: *Heritage Overlays within municipal planning schemes are how councils protect and manage properties with local significance. Each state has its own Act pertaining to its local planning schemes/environment plans. Victoria’s is called the Planning and Environment Act 1987, and Western Australia’s is the Planning and Development Act (2005), for instance. You can find this information, with simplified guidelines on the relevant council website.*

National: *If classified as nationally significant, a building is included on the Department of Environment’s National Heritage List or Commonwealth Heritage List (if owned or controlled by the Commonwealth). These lists are subject to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act (EPBA) 1999. The National Trust collates another influential Heritage list, which is not a legally binding one, nor are the lists produced by the Royal Institute of Architects (RAIA) or Institution of Engineers.*

International: *If internationally Heritage significant, a building or place is registered under the Australian Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999. It may also be listed on the World Heritage List, overseen by UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee, if able to meet its rigorous criteria and assessment.*

Each of the above has its own set of criteria for defining significance and different ways of identifying and listing significant buildings or places.