



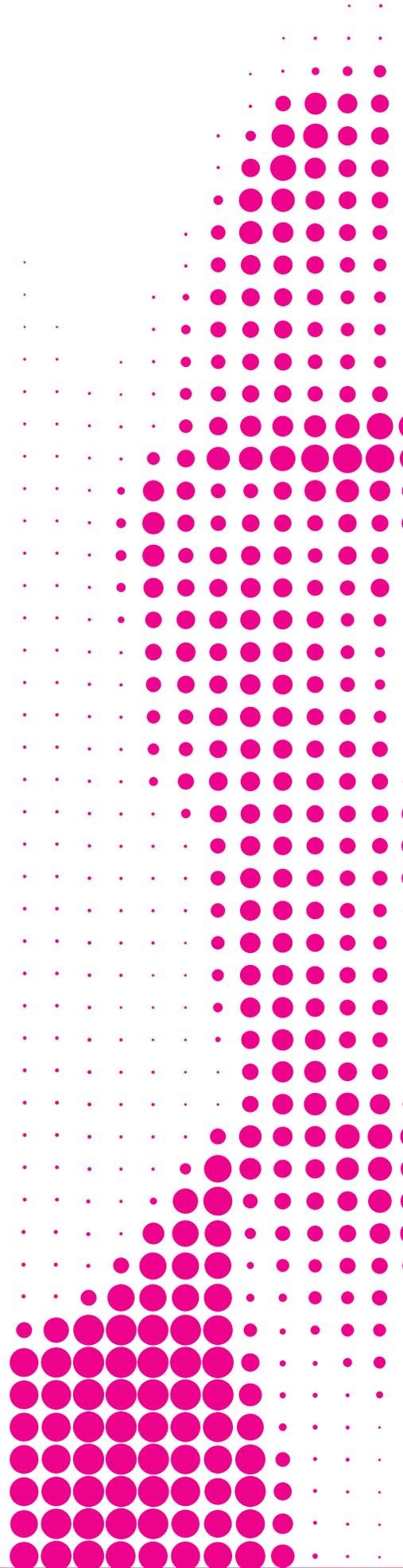
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ADAPT

Empowering Adaptive Reuse in Historic Precincts

By Professor Hannah Lewi, Associate Professor Cameron Logan and
Professor Robert Crawford

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ADAPT: empowering adaptive reuse in historic precincts

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The project aims to showcase design and practice-based approaches to the sustainable, adaptive reuse of historic places in Australia. Supported by the Swayn Foundation grant, and building on our research, a series of 12 interviews have been conducted with leading architects and heritage practitioners in four Australian states. Three edited transcripts are available here. The interviews, and associated case study documentation of exemplary projects are forming the basis of the forthcoming edited book *ADAPT*, to be published with URO Media.

It is our contention that Australia has too few venues for celebrating and disseminating local exemplars of innovative and sound heritage and adaptive reuse practice. We therefore hope that the interviews, and forthcoming book, speak to this need for professional and public dialogue about creative design solutions that find a productive balance between economic and urban redevelopment and the conservation of existing historical buildings, places and materials.

Interviews have been conducted with:

Government Architect NSW; NMBW Architects; Spaceagency Architects; Conrad Gargett; Kirsten Thompson Architects; Six Degrees Architects; Lovell Chen; Rob Riddel; Peter Elliot Architecture + Urban Design; SJB; Dunn and Hillam Architects; TZG Architects; Peter Elliott

With the impacts of globalisation and climate change on architecture and the built environment under intense discussion and critique, the smart adaptive renewal and re-creation of sustainable local places for living and working is of ever-heightened importance. Informed and sensitive adaptive reuse of built fabric, in contrast to total demolition or new build, can bring significant benefits in fostering social and cultural capital, and in sustainable construction development.

These architects and practices persuasively describe projects that foster design and professional know-how for the nurturing of historical contexts that define the unique urban character of our towns and cities.

SJB

Interview with Adam Haddow, Director SJB Sydney on the 27th July, 2022,
with Cameron Logan (CL) and Hannah Lewi (HL).



<https://sjb.com.au/projects/52-reservoir-street/>

- CL: So, starting off, do you as a firm, consciously articulate adaptive reuse as a type of activity? Or is it treated as just another architectural project?
- Adam Haddow: Yes we will typically approach it in a certain way. And there is an articulated philosophy. But it was never a distinct sector of our work. Or identified as a particular kind of work.
- Adam Haddow: It has just been part of our everyday work because – I’m going to say - almost 90 per cent of every project I’ve worked on has some level of adaptive reuse involved.
- Adam Haddow: But because we’ve started to build, or be involved in bigger, more significant or more important adaptive reuse projects, it’s become a marketing asset to be able to say to clients, well we do that.
- Adam Haddow: So it’s not an articulated philosophy from the practice but it’s most definitely always in the background as a position the office has about context more than anything. So, it’s probably less about saying “oh this is an adaptive reuse project”, and it is more about saying, “well let’s understand the context and understand the value of that”. It helps us to ask questions about what’s the value in what exists on the site to begin with, and what do you keep, or don’t you keep, and why would you keep it — if you’re going to keep it. It changes at different scales because in small scale houses, for example, it’s much cheaper just to demolish something and rebuild it – so the strategy around retention needs to be even more robust.
- Adam Haddow: So, then, the kind of conversation has to be about well, where is the value in keeping something, and if there’s no heritage listing in place, but if it’s just that you think it’s got some inherent value, or you believe that there’s a sustainability strategy around it, then it becomes how well you can convince the client of that value. Whereas if it’s a bigger project, often the retention of something can be a lever for a planning discussion.
- Adam Haddow: So, you can often create opportunity out of something that’s already been on the site, and keeping something the council may have not thought had any value in terms of a formal Heritage perspective, but in a general societal perspective, people have placed value on it.
- Adam Haddow: We might place value in, for example, the grain and texture and you can’t design that from scratch, that comes with age over time. So, we then ask how we keep as much of that as possible?
- CL: So, you think that in some ways it articulated more like a consciously urbanistic and contextual way of approaching practice?

- Adam Haddow: Yes
- CL: As opposed to being driven by heritage per se, or even sustainability per se, but rather about thinking really about the city-making process.
- Adam Haddow: Yes, absolutely. I mean I think that in that sense it's much more about asking, from an urban point of view, what does the city need and how can our urban strategy also be about sustainability, which then hopefully draws into environmental sustainability.
- Adam Haddow: Because we're always interested in doing more with less at an urban level, so can we get more on a site; can we make it work a bit harder; can we get the kind of level of intensity and activity that you need to make cities work properly and so people can walk to get a coffee as opposed to getting in the car? All that kind of thing.
- Adam Haddow: In other words can we intensify this site, and that then drives sustainability thinking, but it's not saying consciously at the outset let's "do a sustainable building". We try and always make sustainable decisions, but we just don't necessarily start from that perspective.
- HL: So, just picking up that idea about context, how do you go about understanding context in your practice? Is it done through being there on site, photographing, looking at archives?
- Adam Haddow: It's very broad and it depends very much on the individuals who are undertaking the analysis, but from an education point of view – I trained at Melbourne Uni and it was all about thinking about context. That was always in the background of our first three years at university.
- HL: That's really interesting because we've been talking about this — and one question we haven't directly asked people is about education and influence — where did this come from and was there a perceivable shift?
- Adam Haddow: Yes, because when I was at the University of Melbourne Peter McIntyre, and Jeff Turnbull were both teaching there then and it was all about understanding place in a broader sense. And this is very different to the legacy of other universities. So what I tend to find as the biggest challenge in the office is that architects often say, "well here's my site, let's just look at this site". But actually the whole city is the site which requires taking a step back. So there's a conscious effort in our process in the office to ask that question around "are there any levers in the project that could help you think more broadly about the city and making the city a better place, and within that is a thorough discussion about context".
- Adam Haddow: I think context has got a lot more legs recently. It's much easier to talk about it because the government, particularly in New South Wales, has been pushing the idea about connecting with country. So, if you're going to think about country, you have to think much more broadly than just the land you're working on. So, in the younger architects' minds it makes it easier to have a discussion because they really want to think about what connection to country means, and within that context then you ask, well what's the building next door or down the block, or how many parks do you have and so on.
- CL: We've been asking practices what sort of expertise they have in that space, and are you reaching out to sustainability consultants to achieve certain standards, or are you developing in-house strengths in that area?
- Adam Haddow: I think we rely a lot on the particular interests of people who are in the office to drill down on things and try and really understand them. So, with that in that mind, we do a lot of work on heritage buildings and so therefore we have our preferred people that we work with from a heritage perspective who generally have an open and creative mindset about the way in which they can then respond from a capital "H" heritage point of view. We go to different consultants

depending on the historic value of the buildings we are dealing with. So we do buy in quite a bit of that kind of advice, but we do also have specialists in the office who kind of have their own personal interests in heritage or sustainability and so on. So, it's a little bit of both, and we like to stretch our in-house knowledge to allow people to push their own interests but we do also know when we need to consult experts. And some clients certainly won't pay for that expertise outside our practice, but we might also be able to weave sustainability knowledge into a project so it happens without the client necessarily knowing about it overtly. We also work with a range of clients from government and corporate work who need to certify projects for sustainability, and then private clients who don't need to obviously show off a project's credentials but still might want to achieve good outcomes without over-complicating it.

Adam Haddow: It's a bit like that with heritage as well. Some government projects might be quite cumbersome, whereas a private client might be right onto it in terms of appointing an archaeologist or heritage expert, but don't need to publicise it.

HL: And how do you go about advocating for keeping buildings to clients? And sell the benefits of sustainable approaches yet also satisfying client briefs? Do you use your own past projects, or comparable projects to help persuade clients?

Adam Haddow: It's probably more about dealing with the planning system in Sydney, which is quite unique and quite different to Victoria. So, because the constraints of every site are specified, it sets very clear boundaries as to how much can be built, and as a consequence there is a financial model. So, if someone says I can build two times what my site areas is, therefore it's worth \$x. Whereas in Melbourne you don't have the same system, and it becomes quite entrepreneurial in that sense. In Sydney, for example, someone buys a site that's got a 2-to-1 building to site allowance but there is a building already on the site which has some value – it's not heritage-listed but we think it has value just from a cultural point of view or from a fabric perspective, so we might advocate to keep it. The biggest challenge then is, say, for example, with an old warehouse building that has really high floor-to-floors and you're only allowed to build to a numerical height limit, but the building already takes up two or three stories, so therefore you can't get another two stories on top of it within the height limit. To realise the density potential is really difficult within the planning controls. So then you have to try and get the relevant council or planning authority on board to that way of thinking, and see if some trade-offs can be made – sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't.

Adam Haddow: So, by way of an example, we're doing a project in this street, actually, and there was an old chapel that was part of a funeral home. The whole of Surry Hills was a funeral home at one point! And some of them have chapels inside and they're quite amazing. Anyway, there was another one around the corner and there was no heritage value placed on it: it's not a heritage conservation zone, it is zoned for five stories, for a commercial mixed-use site. So, the only way we could achieve the GFA on the site and keep that building was by going taller.

Adam Haddow: So, let's keep the chapel but if it's only two stories but we're allowed five, we'll have to put an extra level up here. We'll sculpt it, so we're not having a negative impact on anybody from an overshadowing point of view. But the local residents were not happy because it was proposing something outside of the height controls. So, ultimately the council suggested that because there is no recognised heritage value to the existing building and it made our project much more difficult, it was better to get rid of it. Whereas if it was in a heritage conservation zone they could have said, well actually we think that breaking the controls here has merit because we've identified the site as having some cultural value and therefore, we can support a variation to change the height, and they could have had a discussion with the neighbours and

so on. So, it can be quite subtle in the way in which you can achieve retention of existing buildings but it really does need some level of support from the consent authority.

CL: Do you think there could be better mechanisms for supporting the retention of existing fabric rather than demolition?

Adam Haddow: Yes, I mean it comes down to the sophistication and power of the local government authority. Some councils haven't got there yet in terms of understanding what their city needs longer term. And planning approvals that have controls to achieve certain outcomes always take longer. This is a real problem for clients because it is all about holding costs for them: the longer they take the less likely the client's going to be there supporting them. Developers can be quite aggressive and heritage experts don't have enough power to stop demolitions – they get worn down, to the point where they end up agreeing to demolition of a building because there just wouldn't be enough of it left.

Adam Haddow: To a certain extent heritage has been its own worst enemy in a way because they've relied on this idea of “H” Heritage that is very historically specific, and they end up not being inclusive enough. I mean to my mind we should almost consider as a default position that the whole existing city has heritage value and then have to justify why you're demolishing something, right?

CL: The Scottish are having a look at that, actually. Basically, everything is just assumed to be of value and then in every change of situation you have to have a rationale for change as opposed to the other way around.

Adam Haddow: In my opinion the challenge is that because we are a very wealthy society, we have had the money to continually demolish and rebuild. The best, most intact areas, are often in country towns where the town was once wealthy, and then declined for a long period of time.

Adam Haddow: And councils don't have the manpower or sometimes the knowledge to look at buildings and assert that have value, particularly when the local community might say — at least for modern brutalist buildings – “that's the ugliest building I've ever seen”.

HL: Can you suggest key projects that we might look at in terms of case studies of your approach?

Adam Haddow: So, [Newcastle East End](#) definitely, because I think it's just a good urban scale adaptive reuse broad strategy, and it's about adaptive reuse of the city, and how you give back some historic dignity that was ripped from the city in the modernist period.

Adam Haddow: The Liverpool Street project, [Yirranma Place](#), is great. I mean there are probably six or seven projects where – you've got - I mean we try to think about the heritage – we kind of think about these projects in three stages. It's like, okay, well one bit is just restoration...

Adam Haddow: So for example, some of the work we did on the [Griffin incinerators](#), there's restoration work there – the building might have concrete cancer and we just have to address that. Then there's reconstruction and the way I think about that is to ask has there been a violent act that's removed part of the fabric which should never have been removed? At one end of the scale you might say well if there was a war and it got bombed, you'd want to rebuild it, right, because it's about replacing like for like? But equally if someone has ripped the back off a building and put in cheap aluminium windows, well that's a violent act to the building as well, and you should restore it, yes?

Adam Haddow: Then there's the strategy for additions which can then take a whole variety of different paths, from making them very visually distinctive – the old and the new demarcated – which I don't

necessarily always agree with – as it seems like an outdated concept about the way in which we should deal with buildings.

Adam Haddow: If you look at say Kent Street in Sydney and Customs House, for example, and all of those buildings have had buildings added to them, and then more additions and then again, more additions. And most people in the world don't look at that and think "I can see the difference". Most of them think there's some kind of consistent architectural response. Now if you're really interested you can kind of pick out the cultural and social differences, but it really is not that easy to pick the newer from the older.

Adam Haddow: I think that the project for me that really typifies this is Chipperfield's project in the [Neues Museum](#). You walk through the museum and you can see all of those different paths and layers over time, and I think it's a really clear demonstration of how successful that approach can be.

Adam Haddow: So, we always think back to that project and to the work of Carlo Scarpa and try to achieve something close to as good as they have.

HL: Yes, Scarpa's work has come up quite a bit actually in these interviews as influential.

Adam Haddow: We had a very enlightened client and we've done lots of projects with them. So, before we started a job, we flew to Verona, and I took him to [Castelvechio](#) by Scarpa!

HL: Wow!

Adam Haddow: And he was totally into it, so that was good!

Adam Haddow: I've just finished a house for my parents which is just tiny but like it was a 1960s cream brick house. And I suggested - let's not demolish it, but just add to it bit by bit. You can still see and feel the original house. It's like that in regional towns too. Teddy Cruz, who's an urbanist in the US, he used to say that "you don't want to lose the fingerprint of the place".

Adam Haddow: By erasing those kinds of ordinary places you're just slowly erasing the fingerprint and you're changing its identity. Now of course you can change identity for the better but more often than not it doesn't get changed for the better, it gets changed for the worse!

END OF TRANSCRIPT

Spaceagency

Interview with Dimmity Walker (DW) and Michael Patroni (MP), Fremantle on the 22nd April, 2022, with Hannah Lewi (HL).



<http://www.spaceagency.com.au/portfolio/petition-at-the-state-building/>

- HL: The first question is around whether you have a conscious and articulated approach to what you would loosely call adaptive reuse or what we are calling extended use? It doesn't necessarily have to be a change of use, but it's a renewal of use in the body of your work. Or whether each project just brings its own parameters? Do you have any philosophies around that?
- MP: Well it's not written down in a manual. But I think we probably do have a conscious approach to it.
- MP: The projects we work on are typically quite similar. And then there is also a degree of response to a particular situation. But I think we have extended the use, or reused fabric, or re-engage with materials into new projects for my whole practice really, which is nearly 40 years. I think with perhaps a few minor exceptions it has not been a strictly "heritage approach". There are aspects of that, and sometimes when there's the opportunity of reinstating some element, we take it on board, and there are minor instances where we have worked with heritage paint schemes. But that's probably a really minor gesture.
- I think it has been more of a way of seeing heritage, or not even strictly 'heritage' - but rather existing buildings – in terms of seeing the value in them in many different ways. This might have started with straight up pragmatic reuse of something which had some value or interest, and now this approach has taken all sorts of other qualities and gains validation in terms of sustainability. But initially we just said, well this building has an important place within the streetscape and the context of the city, and for this reason we tend to try and work within these inner-city areas, so as to be able to engage with that urban value.
- Also our approach has provided a way of engaging with buildings in a manner that supports something new for that site and brings new users; the public could actually re-engage with this existing structure that's been there for a long time and get excited all over again about it. So we work with programs that bring in a wider public, which is often the case with the hospitality work we often do. I think it's been really exciting to "republish" these buildings, if I can use that word: republish these buildings in a re-edited fashion that appeal generally to a younger generation, because they're the people who tend to go out in public a lot more.
- I think this helps to reinvent buildings culturally and materially. But we haven't just delicately tiptoed around the structure, we've often made significant changes. But in doing so we have developed a methodology of asking the questions ... what's important here? What can actually be changed, and how will it read? Then also understanding how do these changes translate and become perceived? So it is a loose heritage approach but with much more freedom, I think. I suppose that's our main methodology, in a nutshell. But I think what's exciting about it is that idea of culturally "republishing" something that has been walked past unnoticed for perhaps decades.
- HL: I like that idea of a building being "republished".
- DW: It does draw on the observation that there is an established patterning in the streetscape, buildings or whatever. Then when you represent it or you republish it, it creates this whole new

generation of enthusiasm for that place. But it is richer because it's got the history of former lives as well. So it's a layered, many layered, approach. When we're starting a project, in terms of how you decide what's important, there's always lots of different competing ideas, histories and artefacts that are important, but we are not necessarily considering what's important from a heritage building point of view, but rather other qualities such as the social overlay and all the context within the wider streetscape and what's happening around the site. Also thinking carefully about what the new use is going to be and how that interfaces with the old uses of the site, are all formative and interesting at that early stage of a project. Sometimes it's very apparent and clear what are the really important qualities, and how do we enhance that or play to that or retain that, and sometimes it is far less apparent.

- HL: How do you, as a practice, go about assessing value when you get a new project – whether it's historic research into the former social use, or the context of the urban area, or the material history? Is it archival research, on-site photographs or other methods?
- MP: I suppose it varies a bit depending on what the project is. I think primarily it's about reading the existing fabric. Because what I personally like to do is to try and carefully read into the material fabric and the changes that have actually taken place over time and are now embodied into the place. For example, we'll walk around things and look for where walls have been and what's been changed and take note of the different period styles and so on.
- MP: I suppose I try to engage personally with what is, actually, there in an intuitive but very careful manner ... I've developed an eye to read places almost detective-like!
- HL: So it primarily the tangible qualities that you're dealing with first and foremost?
- MP: Yes.
- DW: We will often, also, back that up with going through some relevant archives and finding historical photos and so on. But it's not our go-to starting position, or the most important method. But certainly, if we can find interesting background, we will certainly draw on that as well. But I think, as Michael says, it is largely about being in the space and reading what's there.
- MP: We will source earlier plans and we'll try and actually build on these to ascertain when different layers were built. For example, we are working on the Margaret River Hotel at the moment, and when we have been able to find photographs they can help us to understand how the place has changed: some parts of that building have been filled in, or been pulled down and then filled in, and now some of those elements will be removed again ...then someone else will work over our work It is research in the sense that we are engaging with evidence.
- DW: Because, also, we find that sometimes, for example at the South Terrace [Supported Accommodation Hostel](#) project in Fremantle, where what was thought to be a house was actually the first hospital in that location, and we found all of this social history that made the site and what remained really quite interesting. Then, as we were walking around the site, we could see that there was evidence of this former use, and this became important, including some older traces that might have been convict built. There was clearly a historic project underneath this place that had to be exposed. That was an interesting process of finding evidence.
- MP: Yes, and one that wasn't documented anywhere.
- MP: We were able to persuade the client that we should maintain the core of the building within the project. It was still this little, simple, limestone building but they agreed to do that, and effectively change the whole nature of the project.
- MP: Because it looked like a 1960s Italian-styled villa, but it had had many changes throughout its life.
- DW: Yes, it had feature arches in dark, chocolate bricks.
- MP: But within that there was still this little core of a building. I suppose even that research informed, at least to some degree, the look for the new building form on this site and it sits on the corner.
- DW: It was a good example of that sort of detective work. But what's interesting, in terms of deciding what's important, is that we did actually decide the other aspects of its life were important as well and we referenced even some of the 1960s materiality and elements. It's not just about taking it back to its original shape or form but also acknowledging the lives of the building. Things happen and things change and all of it is somewhat important too.
- MP: Yes, it's both research and looking on-site. Sometimes it isn't a matter of just putting back the original, it is also determining a point at which you cut into the site.

- HL: So this seems to speak to a much more inclusive or organic process than maybe a strictly heritage-driven approach, where assessment of value is determined by what is authentic and conversely what is not perceived as authentic.
- MP: Yes, and I think probably all of our projects come with a commercial imperative. We are looking at the built fabric with, sometimes, a slightly contradictory set of directives. We have a client who generally want to chart a much more commercial direction rather than an architectural or culturally-motivated one, and so it is up to us to mediate between the two: but I suppose it's also more than mediating. It's for us to determine what's important and then stand up and fight for it: it's being an advocate for architecture and saying, this is important and we will find a way to get to where you want to be, but we will draw the line at some point. But on the other hand we might also sacrifice something we might pin value to, so as to compromise somewhere else.
- HL: So do you use your completed projects to advocate to new commercial clients? Would you use your work as a demonstration of how value can be added, in a commercial sense, as well a cultural sense through your approach?
- MP: Yes, essentially that's why clients come to us. By virtue of demonstrating and actually identifying that what we do is successful commercially, that's why the work comes to us. I do think it comes from realising what we've just been talking about. I think clients see the measure that people are engaged with these re-edited places and spaces, and they can see economic value out of that, and a successful project.
- DW: It gives us a strong position when we're saying what we will and won't do: what will work and what won't. So I suppose it gives us a point of arguing from a strong position.
- HL: And do clients typically own the properties, or are they also tenants in say state government owned assets?
- MP: It varies a bit. Often, they own the buildings. In some cases they have long leases that still might be owned by the state government. Or sometimes historic properties are sold for little, but with the pledge that the streetscape will be retained and significant money spent on a refurbishment.
- DW: Yes, that applies in country towns too. It is certainly fertile ground as there are lots of beautiful buildings in regional towns that have been slowly declining but have opportunity.
- HL: We are asking all the interviewees how they work with heritage experts. Do you have those kinds of skills in-house? Do you work with a particular conservation architect or practices, or work in partnership with other specialist practices?
- MP: We're recently engaging heritage professionals to write the conservation management plans. But we are selective about who we work with, and then we brief them very carefully, to convince them of the value in our methodology. I think though we limit our work with heritage professionals to a statutory level, as we see our 'republishing' approach as working with heritage as a continuum rather than fixing it to some point in time.
- DW: For example, on the State Buildings project ([Long Chim at the State Buildings](#) and [Petition at the State Buildings](#)) there was a heritage architect overseeing all of the external restoration. Then we were doing one part of the refurbishment and another practice was doing large sections of it. In a big project like that our work was funnelled through them and onto the Heritage Council of WA. So, if we wanted to alter something we would have to brief the heritage architect, but generally if we presented it as a 'really good idea' and why, then they were onboard.
- HL: Well that is one of the starting points of our project, which is to understand the often unproductive gap between how heritage is safe-guarded and taught, and how buildings can be adapted and re-used productively. For example, do you see a division between the level of protection of interiors of buildings (which might have less controls) versus the exteriors?
- SW: Generally, yes.
- MP: There is typically more concern with exteriors, although in a number of our projects for example like [the Royal George](#), where there was a lot of scrutiny of how all of the services were going to be fitted into the existing building, and how we would deal with openings and so on, so this is moving into the realm of the interior.
- MP: So we work very much within that interface, yet often heritage processes are still employing the idea that they are separate.
- DW: In terms of how it's taught, I suppose it's a hard thing to teach. Because there's not a prescribed methodology that you follow to produce successful adaptive reuse of buildings. I think it comes

down to the empathy and skill of the designer to engage with what's in front of them, the physicality of it, rather than being able to do it because there's a textbook to follow on it. There are a lot of intangible qualities about the space and how to retain what's important about the atmosphere of the space that come with practice.

That might have something to do with the quality of the light or the way in which the material reads in the space, rather than just the floor plan and which walls you take down and which walls you don't take down. There's quite a big, nebulous area in which you can adaptively reuse something. And, of course it comes down to, what is reuse? Is it a continued use or is it a new use? Are we taking something that was a flour mill and turning it into a hotel? Or are we taking something that was always a hotel and extending that life for a new era? It's varied in many ways. It would be quite a difficult thing to teach but I imagine looking at case studies would certainly be useful.

HL: Yes, we are interested in this project with probing the current pedagogical relationships between the training of architects and heritage professionals, in terms of producing better outcomes and skills in the sphere of working with old buildings and places, in particular those places that might be protected at a state or national level. On that topic, we are quizzing interviewees about the *Burra Charter*. In a way, it's probably not something that you deal with directly, but we are interested in asking whether there is productive guidance around strategies of intervention, and whether the advice of “doing only that which is necessary”, and clearly articulating the difference between existing and new elements of built interventions are still relevant in this expanded field of adaptive reuse?

MP: I think it is dated and there is probably a need to be a new convention or revisions to advice.

DW: Yes, I think we are dealing with a different set of concerns that have evolved over the last twenty years in terms of sustainability practices and demands too.

HL: Touching on sustainability then, which is another topic that we've been asking about, in your practice how conscious a part does that play in terms of mounting arguments to demonstrate to clients about the value of retention, whether that's through retention of materials, embodied energy involved in demolition, or to fulfil energy rating criteria?

MP: Well often “reusable” is seen as saving money.

HL: So an economic imperative ... but that's not often actually the case, is it? And it's too often cheaper to knock it down and start again with a clean slate?

DW: Yes, sometimes it's certainly more difficult. But presumably if clients have seen that there's value in the atmosphere and the environment that you're going to create, in part because you are leveraging the heritage qualities, then they might be persuaded.

MP: Yes, that leveraging off what can actually be achieved, whether through planning controls or otherwise – that is important.

MP: Clients can sometimes see value in that. It's sometimes also about re-branding for the clients who are happy to engage with working sustainably.

HL: And do you see benefits in there being more incentives for developers to retain existing buildings, whether that is through tax incentives, planning offsets or whatever other mechanisms?

MP: Yes, I think so. For example, in a historic place like Fremantle, there should be some sort of relief on rates, state government taxes and so on. Because land-owners typically bear the costs of maintaining a state or national asset. But there are few support grants available, or they are pretty modest, and there are a lot of heritage regulations to comply with. It is said that owning a heritage building is a privilege, but there could be other mechanisms like rebates on expenditure, because money is being spent in the economy. But I think there should be certain creative values too rather than only inflexible planning schemes that deal more with car parking and the like.

DW: Even beyond heritage buildings there should be other incentives and capacities to re-use and recycle building fabric.

MP: You can earn points for retention in some green star metrics, but not all commercial buildings have a green rating score. So maybe there is another short-circuit way, in planning policy that could be a conduit for encouraging some level of retention – and that is not necessarily just for heritage buildings.

- HL: Well, we are drawing to the end of the interview, but one other question I am asking interviewees is, can you name other national or international practices that you look to for inspiration, and who are doing things that are interesting or better than in the Australian context?
- MP: Probably, I would say, that establishing my methodology, as I said before, has been a very personal journey for me and I don't really see that it has been something that has come out of external influence. It's interesting, I think at this point now with social media in the last couple of years, to actually see what other practices around the world are doing and how it compares to what we're doing here. I actually feel quite encouraged! We've managed to somehow arrive at a possibly a similar place. Not the same, but a similar position. But it's really come from working in a fairly insular place like Western Australia that doesn't really get a lot of exposure. But, nevertheless, we try to keep doing work that has been valuable in the evolution of this city.
- DW: Yes, and we now see a lot more things that happen elsewhere and usually they're really interesting projects like in Spain where they do historic work very well.
- HL: And do you use travel as a kind of battery charger and source of inspiration?
- DW: Yes, we do. When we travel we look at buildings a lot. But we don't go specifically to see this building or that building. It is more or less very incidental ... just through walking the streets. Which is probably how we generally see the work that we do anyway as sort of part of the larger streetscape. So we are more interested in the whole fabric of the place rather than one heroic monument.
- HL: Yes, I think the attitude to architectural travel has changed a great deal. If you think of the mid-twentieth century when Australian architects Now, certainly in asking this question, interviewees have said similar things about incidental travel and urban experiences. I think Carlo Scarpa is about the only architect that most have named as an inspiration!
- HL: So in closing then, can you recommend some case studies of work that you have done in your practice that we should focus on?
- DW: The State Buildings in Perth; [the Katanning Hotel](#) project – which was an interesting study in adaptive reuse because it was a mill and the transformation there is quite significant in terms of how the interior is made to be habitable.
- MP: [Rechabite Hall in Fremantle](#); [Bread in Common](#) in Fremantle has endured; [Strange Company](#);
- DW: And the supported accommodation project we mentioned previously for Uniting Care Wesley.
- HL: Lots to see, and thank you again for this interview which has been terrific to hear about how you approach your work in the field of adaptive reuse.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

NMBW

Interview with Marika Neustupny (MN) and Nigel Bertram (NB), Lucinda (Bindi) McClean (LM) Melbourne on the 16th November, 2021

with Hannah Lewi (HL) and Cameron Logan (CL).



<https://nmbw.com.au/rmit-building-45/>

HLCL: (CL)

An interesting way to approach this conversation, is to think about that two-way traffic between intervening in such a way as to protect existing value and meaning, but intervening in such a way as to renew, revive and make visible existing value in buildings and places.

NMBW: (MN)

I was just going to note, and Bindi might want to talk more about this, but I feel like the question of time is really important with what's being discussed here. I think that generally in NMBW it's a big part of what we do and think about all the time, and that is to ask what's come before and what is happening now? Then, by implication, what's going to happen in the future, and this future consists of understanding the embodied material of the substance of whatever it is that we are working on, and its cultural memory - I think that's probably crucial in what you're talking about there: ugly buildings might still be very interactive with the cultural development of a certain place and the ongoing process of remaking it into a real place.

NMBW: (NB)

Adaptive reuse already presupposes or includes the idea that someone else will adapt the site again after you. You are just one in a chain of interventions. That actually happened at the New Academic Street at RMIT. It was such a big project and it took so long to build a new academic street, that by the time we got to the end, the client was already changing aspects of work that were completed at the beginning. And so you could never say the project is finished, because the clients shifted around during that time.

NMBW: (LM)

Adaptive reuse engages with a building that is to otherwise become redundant in some way or there's a shift of use and that it's quite different to just heritage protecting something: it is a more proactive approach. I would say that part of it, particularly in the sort of nature of buildings, like RMIT that there are a lot of unknowns and chance and that it is not necessarily about tasks and plans that can neatly be controlled. Often, I think that's why it's difficult when it comes to meeting contemporary regulations, because they don't like chance and unknowns.

NMBW: (NB)

Latent conditions is a really important concept here which is basically all the stuff that is just found in the course of a project, and no one knows quite what to do with. It is normal with a small project like a house extension, but when you are working within a fixed-price contract on big and innovative jobs these latent or as yet unknown conditions can become a nightmare.

HLCL: (HL)

I can really understand that particularly when you are entering the flow of a complex organisation like a university that also diffuse and unplanned in many ways.

NMBW: (NB)

Some buildings are just so historically valuable in their own right and almost if you can't think of a use for them, it doesn't much matter. They will endure and can become the museum or similar: they are a kind of museum of themselves. Then there are other buildings which have become redundant because something has changed, like the way university is organised or the ways that technological work has shifted, or, as in hospitals, where they become quickly out of date. Then a more violent change is required. In other words, it's the opposite of the conservation concept of delicate small changes – as little intervention as possible. Actually, you sometimes need to be quite forceful. We worked on a project for the University of Melbourne that's now been demolished, where the new Melbourne Connect project is now located. The temporary scenario was known as the Carlton Connect Initiative, which utilised the old Women's Hospital Building in Carlton, which has a really rough existing structure that we cut big holes into, because it was otherwise completely dysfunctional as it was, and our task was to make it useable. Another example, we're currently working on Frank Tate Building, as part of the New Student Precinct for

the University of Melbourne. The outside of the building is heritage-listed, as a City of Melbourne level. But the inside is not. It was once a student gymnasium and the building had a totally symmetrical plan where all teachers-college students were kept totally segregated between males and females in amenities until they met in the gymnasium space, which sounds a bit risky all around! Anyway, consequently building has therefore been unable to be used satisfactorily for the last 50 years, also because it has solid brick walls up to three metres high. So in order to allow a new purpose we are cutting huge holes in it and turning it into an outdoor covered space. It is an oddly socially deterministic kind of history embodied in the building, and why it exists the way it does, so be being bold we can try and find a new relevance for the thing so as to retain some sense of the artefact, but to address that it had become completely unusable – just like a blockage or a kind of void.

HLCL: (HL)

I think that speaks to one of the other motivations for this project is to explore the perceived inadequacies of the heritage industry in the way they sometimes engage with architects in these sorts of major renewal projects. As you say, where quite brutal intervention is probably warranted, and therefore the doctrine of the Burra Charter to “do as little as possible, but as much as necessary”, and to clearly articulate the new work from the original, might be less than helpful guidance. And it might be counter-productive in allowing the former buildings to be re-used.

NMBW: (MN)

Yes, I was just going to say that the original or previous use of the building does determine quite a lot of the buildings that we have just mentioned - the Carlton hospital building or the Frank Tate Building - they're really specific programs that require certain architectural responses. The hospital was really difficult to reuse for anything else, because it didn't have enough natural light and had a really huge floorplate which was perfect for the hospital use, and Frank Tate didn't have any windows.

These are the sort of aspects of the former design and structures that make it very difficult to reuse some heritage buildings, and at the same time, they're the very things that we try and think hard about. What aspects of design makes something able to be reused in different ways? Flexibility does – a lot of the flexibility comes from these very simple factors such as available natural light, and being able to modulate light and the flow and circulation of people.

NMBW: (NB)

The easiest example is the front rooms of the terrace house. They don't need any modification at all to be suited to a whole range of uses that they be put to; office, doctor, bedroom, living room, whatever, because they're a really nice scale, usually have good access, good outlook, enough light, enough ceiling height. Whereas in newer 20th century buildings, as opposed to clearly historic spaces which are really specific, these spaces of an industrial society are also often quite restrictive. Slab blocks that have very deep floor plates for example.

However, of course actually sometimes the difficult ones are more interesting, because you have to do bigger things. I think one amazing project which is quite different and very special, is the Paddington Reservoir Gardens in Sydney (Architects: TZG). I mean, that is an amazing project, because it's a total change of use and it's taking this site that's inaccessible and making it available in a different and potentially beautiful way. Up until that point, it was probably just a ruined garage. I think in that way, the Frank Tate Building is similar, because it just becomes redundant infrastructure.

CLHL: (CL)

Yes, it is a classic problem in this domain of work where there are not enough cultural briefs to fill all the potential buildings that might warrant reuse.

NMBW: (LM)

Another thing I was thinking about is our project in Box Hill Gardens that is totally external. There's no internal space and so there are only particular climatic issues – which is always a big limiting factor when it comes to reuse of buildings and existing material. Sometimes it's semi expandable as an envelope and sometimes not.

NMBW: (NB)

That doesn't work with a gallery, does it, because a gallery's got to have humidity controls. Also at RMIT we exerted external space into what was originally internal in order to free it up – for instance with passages being just naturally ventilated: the birds can fly through. At Frank Tate on the University of Melbourne campus we've done the same. In the original masterplan, it was proposed to be full of retail and we said that's the single worst thing you could put in that building because of all the extraction and all the other service issues.

We proposed as a team to say it's going to be what we call the “market hall”, which is a medieval type: originally it was a covered market in the middle of the town, where it might form an enclosed space from above that people can come and go within – basically like one big veranda. In other words, it is a space free from program, because the program was just going to kill it. And it's going to be an unconditioned space, which is something we often have to fight for. Historic buildings like, for example the 1888 Building on the University of Melbourne campus was never meant to be airconditioned – the windows open and that provides the ventilation, with existing radiator panels for heating. So we had to include in the budget that all the windows be checked and made to open again, therefore keeping air conditioning out of the building.

- HLCL: (HL) Going back to the topic of 20th century buildings that, in terms of heritage and conservation strategies, often have a very tight fit between function and form, as 20th century building types like hospitals, factories etc. And so to intervene in these building types requires a different set of strategies than say a Georgian terrace house.
- NMBW: (MN) I think it almost could warrant a separate category of approach with 20th century buildings, where for example the existing floor plates and circulation make the buildings relatively easy to work with and to convert into something like an open gallery space that is fairly free in its programmatic requirements. What is really hard is a difficult building in a difficult location, say with a hyper specific former use, and it is very difficult to make something new and good work in that situation.
- NMBW: (NB) I was just thinking back to our very early work on Building 45 at RMIT, which was an industrial, brick building. Something that we’re particularly interested in, which is about not just individual buildings becoming obsolete, but more about engaging with whole urban areas, so in this case the small-scale industrial context in Melbourne.
- NMBW: (NB) The building is situated on Lygon Street and it was formally a Beaurepaire tyre factory. It is a good example of our work because it was probably the first project that set a pattern for quite a few ideas. There were concrete beams in the roof, because like many of those types of buildings, it was designed to have more floors on top that were never built. Our strategy was just to remove all the accretion, so just strip out all the junk that had been added over it and try and find the value: there were beautiful blue tiles on the street façade that had been painted white and somebody took the paint off and pulled out the glazed bricks that had been bashed around and put back the glazed bricks.
- The building had already been reused, we think for a dental practice, but that had just killed the building’s integrity. There had been originally an entry for the trucks when it was tyre place, and a showroom entry, so we made the showroom for a postgraduate lab space, and the we stripped back the truck entrance which had been plastered over and reopened it for everyone to use: we said it makes a great entrance – because of course it originally was an entrance, and all the levels work, including as a disabled access. The studio spaces we aligned to the proportion of the existing beam configuration above, so that set the width of the studio, and then the depth was constrained by natural light availability. This is the balancing act in terms of asking what was the structure doing; where was the light coming from; how did the entrances and levels logically work? It is almost like we did nothing, but in fact we undid all the accretions that couldn’t reap those qualities. This is sometimes very hard to discern from drawings because when a client like RMIT or the University of Melbourne give you the CAD plans of the existing conditions – you look at them and every wall is depicted as of equal value in the data.
- Whether it’s original structure or just a plaster board encapsulating the downpipe around a column, or some random bit of sheet, it’s given the same line value as the plan. So then, what we would do is go and find the original construction drawings which can tell you a lot more about what the actual structure is, and what the original intent was so as to help us classify what is of significance and what’s insignificant or getting in the way of those qualities being revealed. By doing this - and I think it was one of your questions that - part of our process is archival detective work where we just pour over the original drawings: what was there before, and you discover things like the classic scenario of a, say a basement, because of a hole there for another reason. Original drawings give you clues as to the previous structure and clues about previous functions.
- MNBW: (LM) It was also helpful because it was classified a temporary project by RMIT and therefore there wasn’t quite the same expectations. We were able to achieve a light touch with a fairly rough finish which also allowed us to leave everything above the two metre height pretty much as existing. We managed to work in a way which we might not have been able to if it was considered a more permanent project: the building was still slated for demolition and we were creating a kind of emergency temporary project. Although it has still persisted for five years, and renovated subsequently a few times.
- NMBW: (MN) The finding of the original drawings and photos of the Bates Smart McCutcheon (BSM) buildings at RMIT when they were first built, were also very informative as they show what BSM were proud of and what they really interested in. What this evidence provides for us, besides the overall information, is to highlight the gradations of value in buildings. Studying them carefully can reveal the logic of existing buildings. I think that’s where we’re really trying to get to – it’s not actually about keeping or not keeping buildings but it is more about understanding the fit between the system of the building – so structure and materials, gravity, and all these sorts of very basic building qualities. Understanding the fit between these qualities and the proposed functional program is key.

- NMBW: (NB) RMIT is a very good example of that process, where we found a great deal in the archives. We had a whole set of complicated documents of a massive precinct where it was hard to tell what was structural and what was non-structural, and what was original and what was not. We went through and found the original plans, of which there were only fragments remaining and we found some photographs taken by Wolfgang Sievers in the State Library of Victorian archive, which, as Marika said, showed the building just when stage one was complete in the 1960s and you could see the context of other now-demolished buildings on either side. What was remarkable was that this project was all about opening up and making more porous and transparent what was seen as a big cliff of existing buildings: they were called the “grey ghosts”, but surprisingly in the original photos, these buildings were actually quite open at ground level with external voids that had since been filled in. We said, as these buildings were not historical landmark buildings that obviously the easiest holes to make in the building are the holes that are or were already there. Voids were already structurally in place and we could just use the original holes as a template to clear out a path of least resistance through the building, but one that had been totally obliterated. That’s the kind of efficient route, and the most natural fit between keeping the existing but accommodating a desire for openness. It’s the same as the Building 45 example of the entry where the trucks used to go.
- HLCL: (HL) Yes, and that speaks to an approach that the Scottish planner Patrick Geddes talked about, where conservation in conceived of as “surgery” –dissecting places, ‘thinning them out’ and re-equipping them for current use.
- CLHL: (CL) What I’m hearing mostly is that you think of these qualities in relation to light, materials, structure and so on, as about looking into the original architectural processes and approach and working with them in your own design strategies. What I would like to raise then is to what extent do specialisms of sustainability inform your projects,
- NMBW: (NB) I’m going to say one more thing before we get onto sustainability because we talked about it before and we didn’t finish the conversation, which was around working with heritage. We work directly with heritage specialists like Lovell Chen for example on the University of Melbourne, but on projects like we have been discussing at RMIT or Building 45, where the buildings have not yet been historically studied or valued, so we are often the first people to point out their value to clients. And we may at times find ourselves at odds with heritage architects about interpretations of what is significant. We worked a long time ago on the Maribyrnong Defence Site master plan that never went ahead, but it was a very complex project of reuse that ended up being too complex because the site couldn’t be de-contaminated in an economical way. We found ourselves disagreeing with the heritage consultants, who took a very correct and legal understanding of historical value, as we were keen to try and keep more of the existing site. We are more interested in understanding value from an architectural perspective that is more holistic and almost like a bodily and sensory approach to say the feeling of strength in an existing concrete wall, or the spatial qualities of an existing tree or whatever.
- NMBW: (MN) I think that the Maribyrnong Defence Site is actually quite a good example, not that it was ever built, but the heritage architects really pinpointed particular buildings or even just an historic veranda for example which were worth retaining. Whereas what we were really interested in was the relationship between this building and that building – the ensemble or spatial system of existing of things.
- NMBW: (LM) This approach allowed for a very different way of thinking about buildings in relation to what’s around them and not about building in isolation. It was also about the ground, as the site had these incredible earth mounds that we were interested in working with.
- HLCL: (HL) That’s really interesting, as this resonates with a much broader critique of heritage protection that only allows for keeping buildings and artefacts in isolation without retaining often the valuable relationships and sensory qualities overall of an historic area.
- NMBW: (NB) Yes, and we have found that sometimes they are willing to let everything else go in favour of just keeping a façade.
- CLHL: (CL) I think it is also important to understand what point of view the heritage consultants are coming from, and whether they are needed to play defensively against the developer or an architect who is actually unsympathetic in entirety to reuse. Or whether they are dealing with an architect or developer who is interested in realising a proposal that is transformative and sympathetic even if that might be somewhat different to what statutorily protected according to heritage listings and the idea of heritage as ‘art’.
- NMBW: (NB) It is art. I’m not trying to denigrate that, we need heritage art, I’m just trying to point out that that’s a different situation to dealing with old buildings that are not elevated to that level of

- heritage protection. The two strategies can be complimentary together too and that can be a great outcome.
- CLHL: (CL) Yes, I think that is a good point, in that heritage protection can be restrictive but it also can be enabling. Which brings me back to the question of engaging with other consultants and developing a professional relationship with them.
- CLHL: (HL) Well, I think it's related as well, because if we actually get serious about the agenda of retention wherever possible, then it's not just about heritage, there is actually going to be other regulatory processes that should take into account what you're keeping and how that actually contributes to the performance of a building. Hopefully our attitude on retention will shift. And that's where we are interested. In how you work with consultants to consciously and persuasively communicate to a client the benefits of retaining material fabric.
- NMBW: (NB) Can we discuss an example? Maybe go back to Carlton Connect the building that was on the site now called Melbourne Connect. We did the renovation of the two-storey structure partially underground that was on the corner of that site in Carlton. We knew a bigger building was wanted on the corner, however we said, let's do it in a way that uses the existing structure which was originally designed to accommodate another six levels - the columns were oversized – ready for stage 2 that never happened.
- We said, we'll design this in a way that you could keep the structure and use it as the basis for the future building. That was embraced at the time, the clients (University of Melbourne) conceptually thought, yes, that's a good idea. For some reason, unknown to us, that all got canned. Then, for the next phase of the same site, we again thought that there was a perfectly good slab block with the former-hospital next door with a huge floor area so why don't we keep it? However, anecdotally, we heard that when the contractors came in, they said that retention was a waste of time and much easier to demolish the whole thing and build a new one, so the whole project got canned. Why would you pull down a perfectly good thing? It is depressing when that happens because the clients and the other architectural practice who had worked on the masterplan were onboard with this approach on the grounds of the savings in embodied energy and the like.
- NMBW: (NB) At the moment, there is little incentive to take this kind of care on larger projects, no one is putting a dollar value on anything long-term like embodied energy savings.
- And everyone knows it's messier and more complicated to keep old buildings and structures and it's certainly easier and cheaper to just replace with new. That's because no one's properly measuring or valuing these dimensions in the building process in Australia yet.
- The other aspect of building sustainably that is getting very difficult is the requirement to meet insulation and air tightness. We're currently working on a project and reusing a 1960s office building in Richmond where essentially strategies like wrapping the whole building in a new skin are required to get it to perform environmentally. That's one strategy, and at the other extreme, you might actually say at the outset that this is an old building so you shouldn't have the same temperature and comfort expectations as you do in a new building.
- So, for example, in the “1888” Building on the University of Melbourne campus, we said, look the temperature range will not be at the level that the University normally requires, but in this case retaining this heritage building is more important. So in other words this is about convincing people to accept a bit of larger range in indoor thermal performance, because this kind of building is only naturally ventilated.
- Anyway, they're two extremes: one is to do a lot less, and a lot of sustainability consultants are really on-board with that approach. On the other hand, if you can't patch and repair, you've got to encapsulate the whole existing building which are leaky and then you cannot certify them.
- HLCL: (HL) That is also the view being offered by architectural historians and academics too, for example Barnabas Calder's book, *Architecture: From Prehistory to Climate Emergency*, which challenges our current expectations around thermal comfort and performance in particular scenarios and particular kinds of historic buildings. And this has been further complicated by ventilation requirements to deal with transmission in the COVID pandemic.
- CLHL: (CL) Is there a single regulatory impediment in the system at the moment that you are encountering that, in either one of these kinds of approaches, really shifts the needle on what you can achieve?
- NMBW: (NB) Well we were talking the other day about the arbitrary rule around 50% of the site being upgraded and the additional requirements if you exceed that 50% scope of works.
- NMBW: (NB) If we take an example like the Frank Tate Building on the University of Melbourne campus for example, which we made very sure we kept under 50% of the original building because otherwise we would have had to meet seismic earthquake regulations which would have meant building an entirely new steel structure inside the building to hold up what had essentially existed there for many years without it. So to avoid that additional cost and imposition on the structure we had to make sure we stayed under the 50% threshold. But it is, in reality, very arbitrary.

- But it is all to do with the two biggest issues in adaptive reuse which is thermal performance and accessibility codes.
- NMBW: (LM) I think another interesting thing is around the fact that it is becoming harder and harder to dispose of construction site waste. Sometimes possibly it is becoming more cost effective to keep some massive elements because of this. But it has always been really difficult to actually keep building materials that have been demolished and to reuse them effectively. It's all to do with storage constraints, insurances and the like.
- NMBW: (LM) Also, demolition is carried out by a completely different team that just come in and get the job done. Whereas I think in our projects there is often a definitely different way of thinking about this delineation between demolition and construction.
- NMBW: (MN) That is changing though, definitely in the last 10 years or so. But it is still very easy, as a builder, to use a demolition contractor to just wipe the slate clean. We are trying to explore that line between demolition and construction.
- NMBW: (NB) I think that - let's just say when there's a pragmatic reason to keep stuff, it's great. When there's not, it's very difficult. At RMIT, initially everybody hated the existing buildings, 10, 12, 14, and they just wished they were gone for a whole raft of reasons. But to demolish them was also a problem – not just in terms of the dust produced but also the noise which would have shut down the whole university for some time. Because something like 50% of the entire floorspace of RMIT city campus was contained in the buildings in question, so in a sense a position of reuse was forced upon them, and ended up redefining the whole project which worked very well.
- NMBW: (LM) Just finally, going back to an earlier point in our discussion, I think that by recognising also the cultural memories and labour embodied in existing, we can actually open up that past by engaging with the buildings – we are part of the continuum – we are not therefore seeking to claim that the now is any more significant than what went before.
- CLHL: (CL) Yes, to think in various timescales is interesting. We once had a guest stone conservationist talk to students about the Sydney sandstone plateau that is some 300 million years old. So the timescale of the sandstone itself matters just as much as the 160 year old building that used this stone. We need more ways of recognising this deeper sense of time and value embodied in materials and Indigenous cultures. And we therefore need a heritage system that recognises these kinds of extended values and temporalities of place too. That's if we are going to do better with adapting and reusing existing buildings, rather than just say keeping a thin façade.
- HLCL: (CL) Thank you again for this interview, it has been really interesting and illuminating.

END OF TRANSCRIPT
